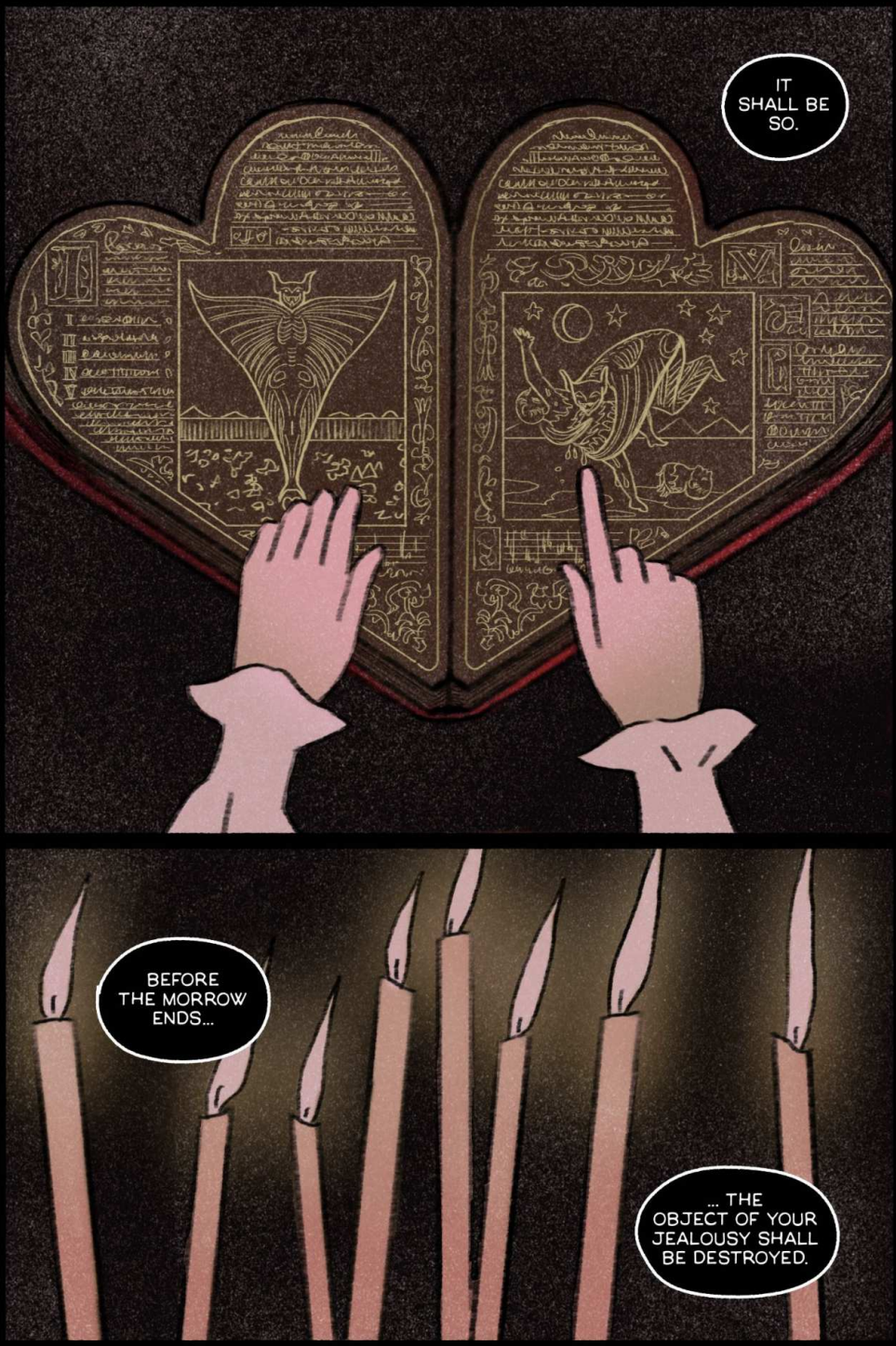
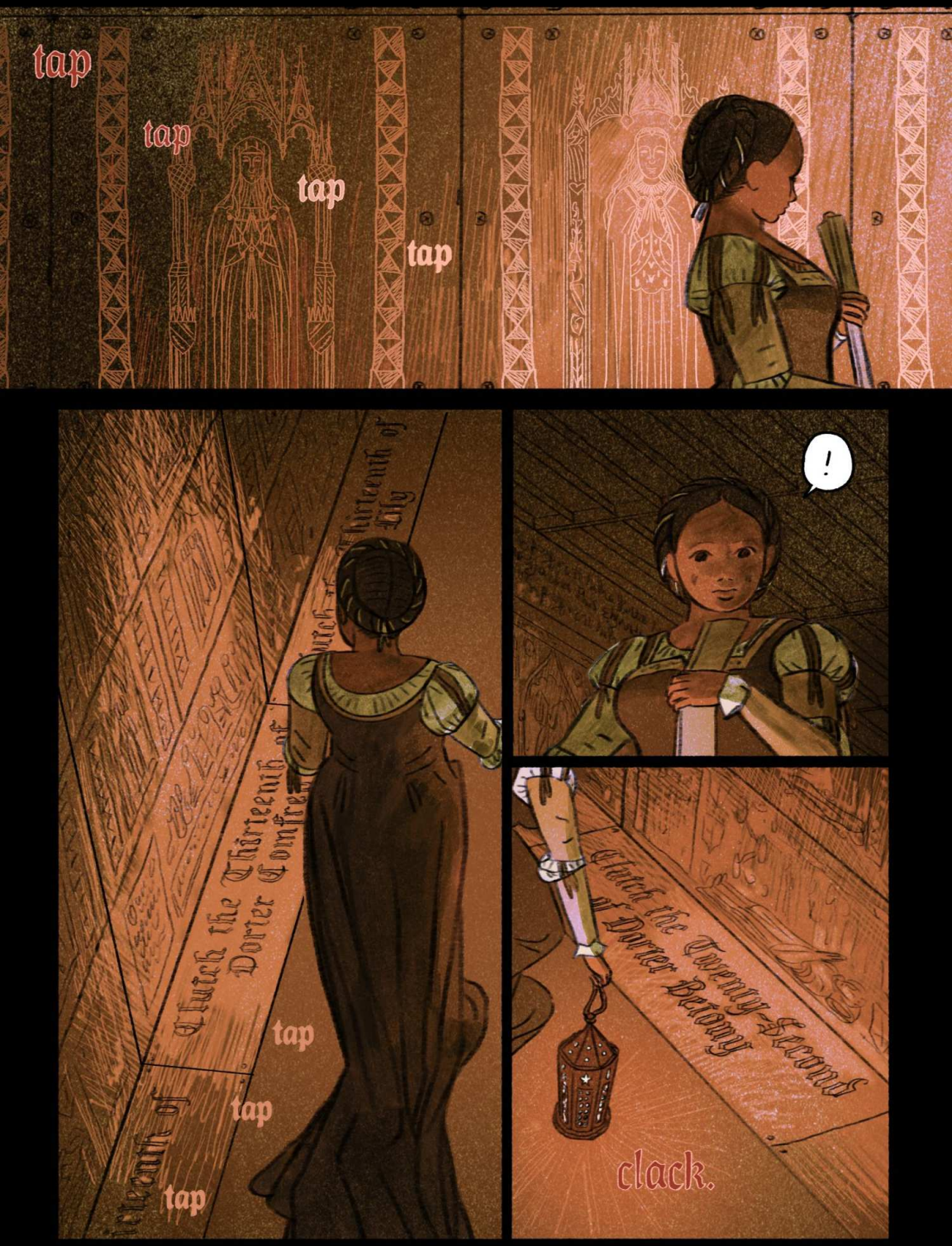
Ladies of the Living Princess
by Theo Stultz


IT SHALL BE SO.
BEFORE THE MORROW ENDS...
... THE OBJECT OF YOUR JEALOUSY SHALL BE DESTROYED.

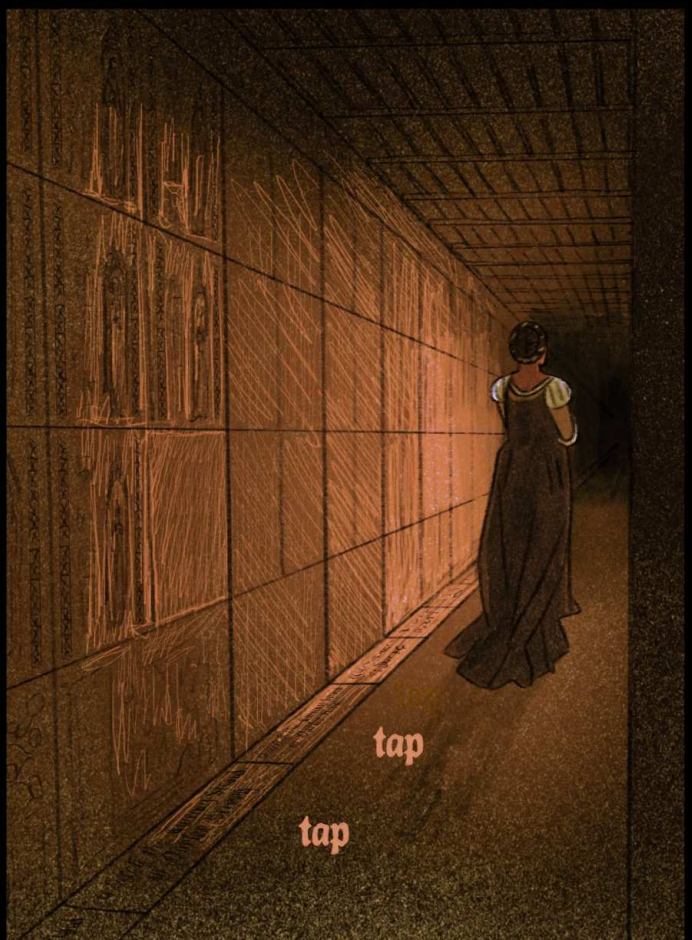
tap
tap
tap
tap
tap
tap


tap
tap
tap
tap
!
Church the Thirteenth of Dorter Tomfret
tap
tap
tap
Church the Twenty-Second of Dorter Betony
clack.

riiiiip
shfft

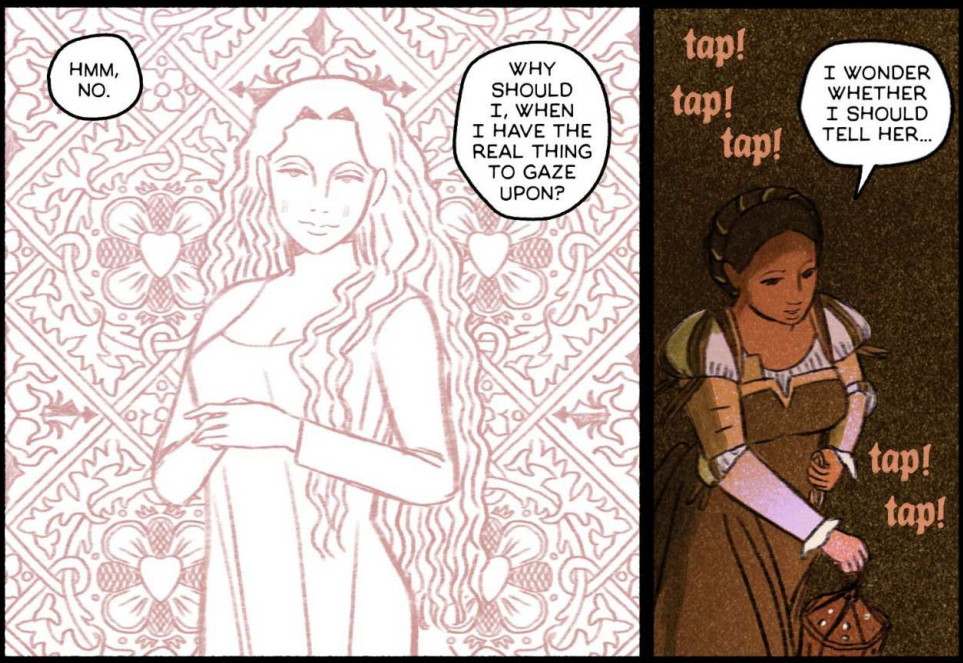
fwip.

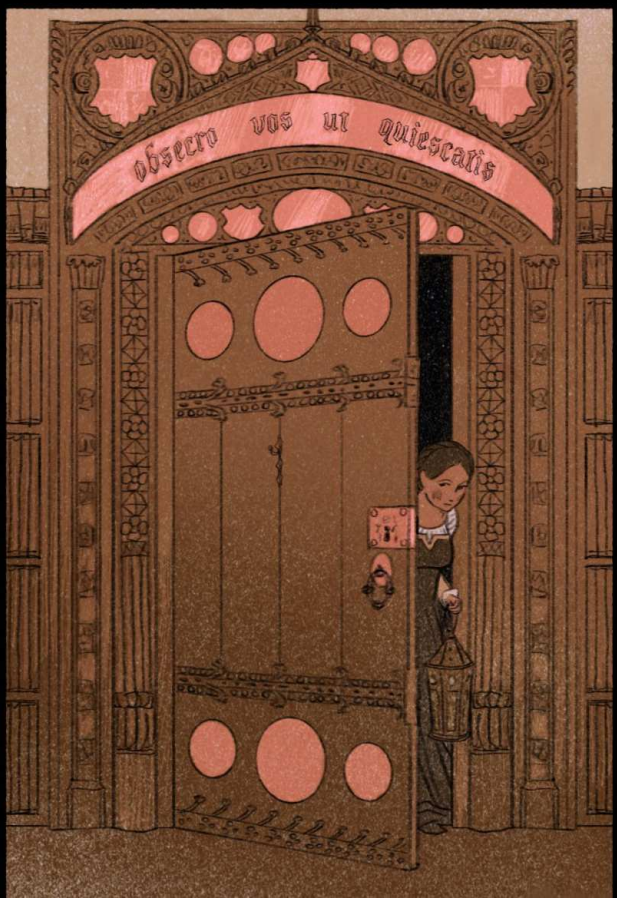
tap!


tap
tap

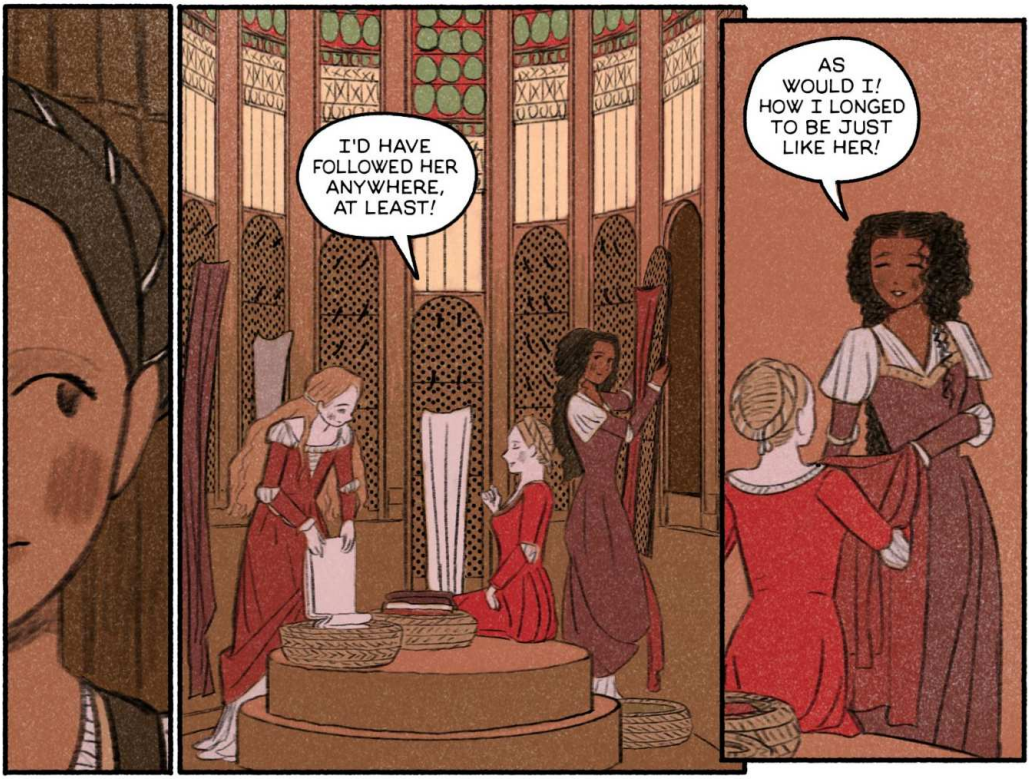
tap
tap

cluh–
clink!
WHAAAAT?!
FOR GENEVIEVE? BUT SHE YET LIVES!
A BIT TOO EARLY FOR THAT, IS IT NOT!
...IT IS AN EXCELLENT LIKENESS.
SHALL I TAKE THIS ONE TOO...?


HMM, NO.
WHY SHOULD I, WHEN I HAVE THE REAL THING TO GAZE UPON?
tap!
tap!
tap!
I WONDER WHETHER I SHOULD TELL HER...
tap!
tap!

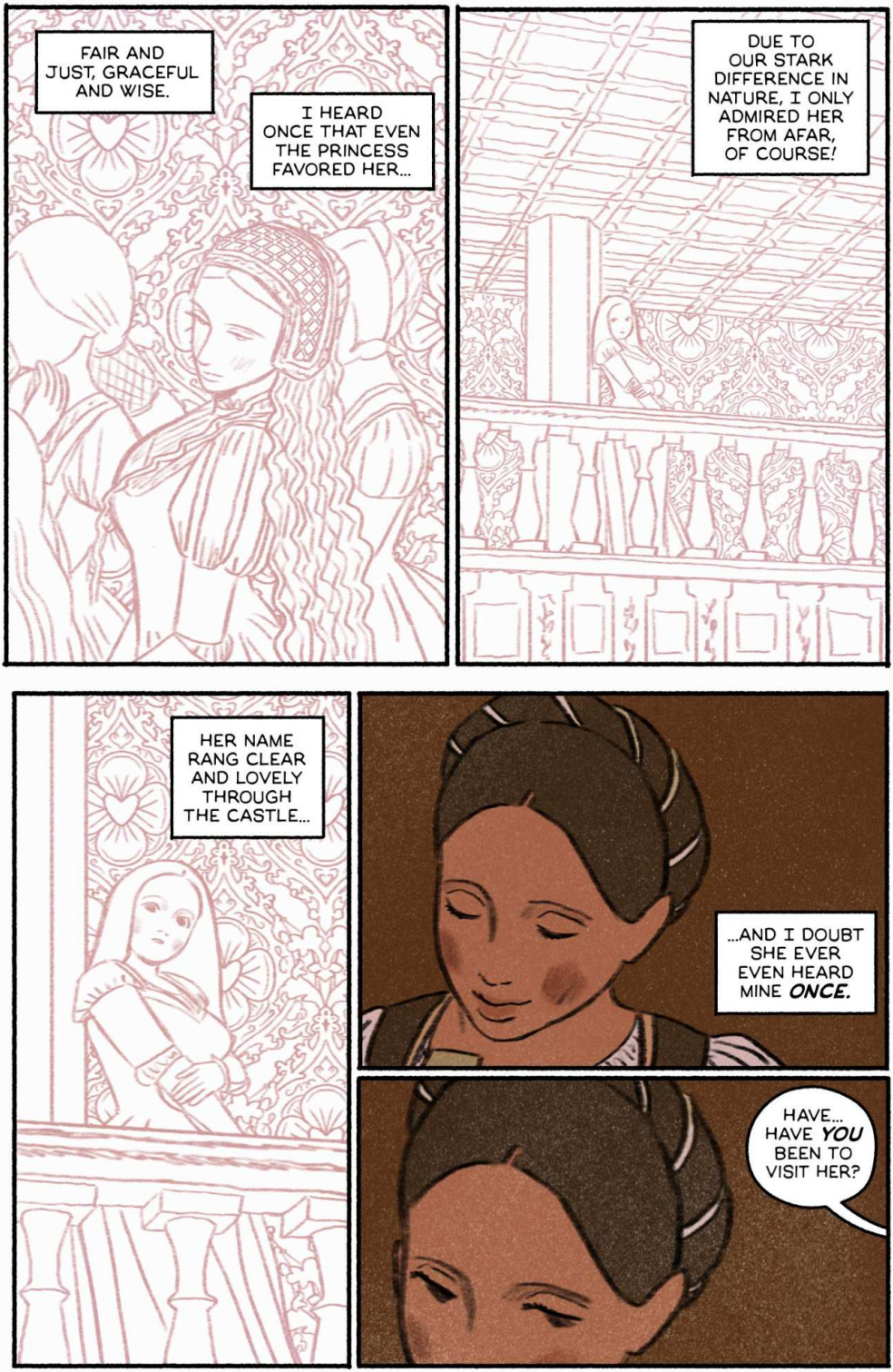

obsecro vos ut quiescatis

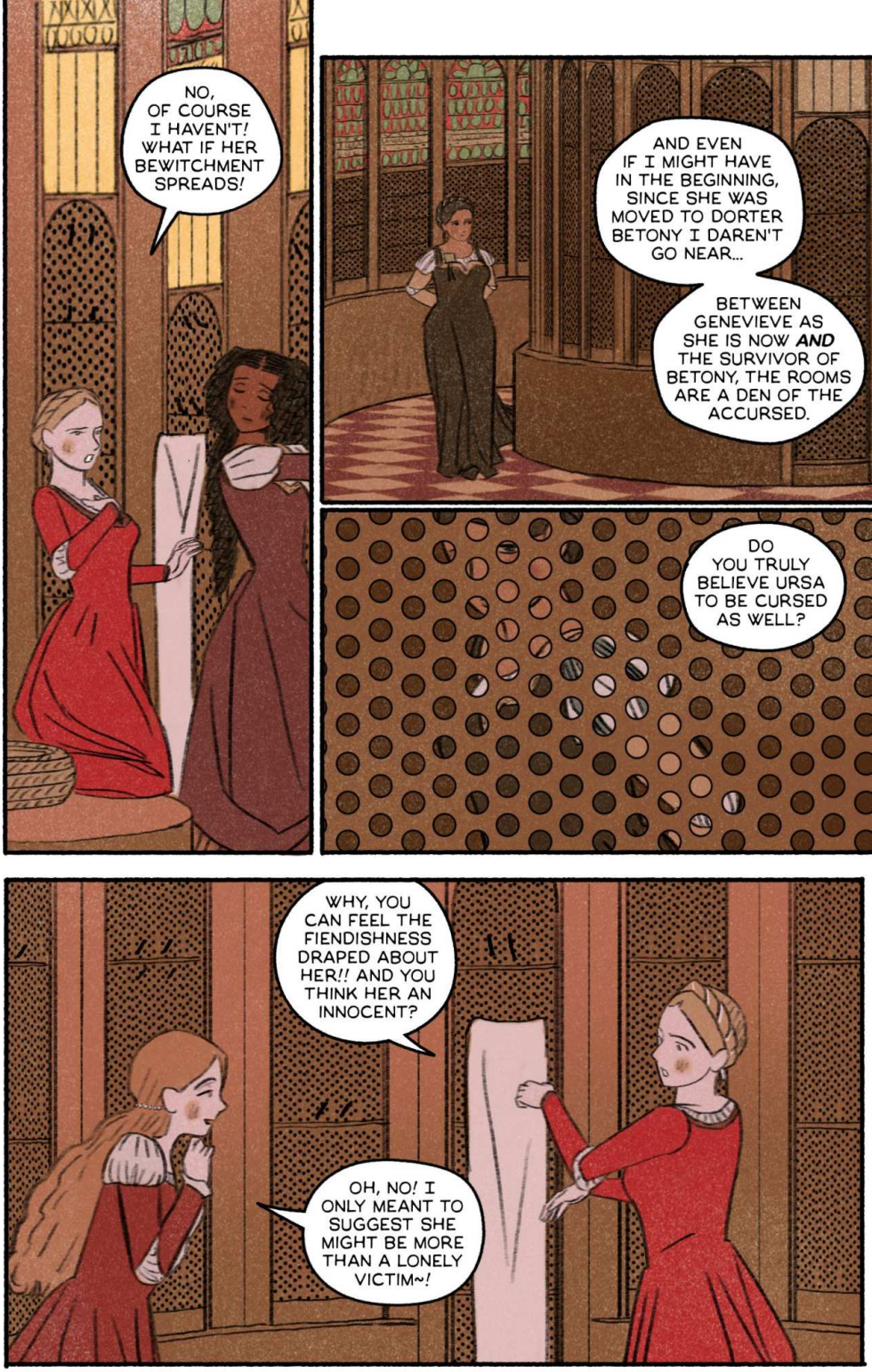
HAHA, I REMEMBER THAT!
HER CLEVERNESS SO FAR OUTSHINED THE MATRON IN THAT MOMENT, BUT THE MATRON WAS NOT BOTHERED AT ALL.
WHEN YOU'RE A GIRL LIKE HER, YOU CAN GET AWAY WITH NEARLY ANY-THING...
...FOR EVERYONE KNOWS YOU MEAN ONLY GOOD BY IT ALL.
"YES GENEVIEVE, YOU MUST KNOW BEST!" HAHAHA!
BUT WAS THAT NOT HOW IT FELT WHEN-EVER SHE SPOKE?
SWISH


I'D HAVE FOLLOWED HER ANYWHERE, AT LEAST!
AS WOULD I! HOW I LONGED TO BE JUST LIKE HER!

WELL, IT IS ONLY NATURAL. THAT IS THE SORT OF GIRL GENEVIEVE IS.

ALWAYS SURROUNDED BY ADORING FRIENDS AND FOLLOWERS, EFFORTLESSLY BELOVED.


FAIR AND JUST, GRACEFUL AND WISE.
I HEARD ONCE THAT EVEN THE PRINCESS FAVORED HER...
DUE TO OUR STARK DIFFERENCE IN NATURE, I ONLY ADMIRED HER FROM AFAR, OF COURSE!
HER NAME RANG CLEAR AND LOVELY THROUGH THE CASTLE...
...AND I DOUBT SHE EVER EVEN HEARD MINE ONCE.
HAVE... HAVE YOU BEEN TO VISIT HER?


NO, OF COURSE I HAVEN'T! WHAT IF HER BEWITCHMENT SPREADS!
AND EVEN IF I MIGHT HAVE IN THE BEGINNING, SINCE SHE WAS MOVED TO DORTER BETONY I DAREN'T GO NEAR...
BETWEEN GENEVIEVE AS SHE IS NOW AND THE SURVIVOR OF BETONY, THE ROOMS ARE A DEN OF THE ACCURSED.
DO YOU TRULY BELIEVE URSA TO BE CURSED AS WELL?
WHY, YOU CAN FEEL THE FIENDISHNESS DRAPED ABOUT HER!! AND YOU THINK HER AN INNOCENT?
OH, NO! I ONLY MEANT TO SUGGEST SHE MIGHT BE MORE THAN A LONELY VICTIM~!

SUCH AN ODD GIRL, I WOULD NOT BE SURPRISED IF SHE'S CAST OUT ONE DAY FOR HAVING PERFORMED WICKED SPELLS ON HER POOR CLUTCH-SISTERS!
EEP! DON'T JOKE ABOUT THAT, HAHA!
HUH?

URSA?!
BOO!

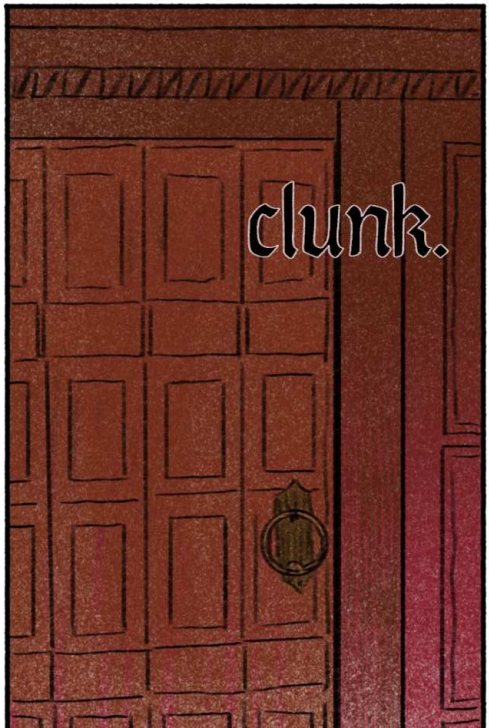
OOF!
baf
Shrieeeeeek!
HA
HA
HA!

SO THIS IS HOW YOU SPEND YOUR TIME INSTEAD OF ATTENDING TO YOUR DUTIES, URSA?
PREYING UPON THE DELICATE NERVES OF YOUR PEERS?

THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN CALLED TO SERVE OUR PRINCESS ARE ENTRUSTED WITH A SACRED PURPOSE.
NOBLE WORK IS CARRIED OUT BY THE GIRLS HERE...
...AND DESPITE BEING A GROWN WOMAN WHO SHOULD UNDERSTAND HER RESPONSIBILITIES, YOU BRING SHAME TO YOURSELF AND TO YOUR SCORES OF FELLOW LADIES-IN-WAITING THAT POPULATE THE HALLOWED INNERMOST CASTLE--
URSULA OF BETONY.
AM I BORING YOU?
WHAT IS THIS...
THE KEYS TO THE CRYPT PINNED TO YOUR BREAST?!
WHEREVER DID YOU COME UPON THESE?!
YOU HAVE NOW LOWERED YOURSELF TO THIEVERY, IS THAT IT!

WHAT IN HEAVEN'S NAME WERE YOU DOING IN THERE?
AND WHAT ARE--
!!
I... I SEE.
...DO NOT ENTER THE CRYPT WITH-OUT PERMISSION AGAIN, OR I SWEAR YOU SHALL BE PUNISHED.
MMMM.
AND...

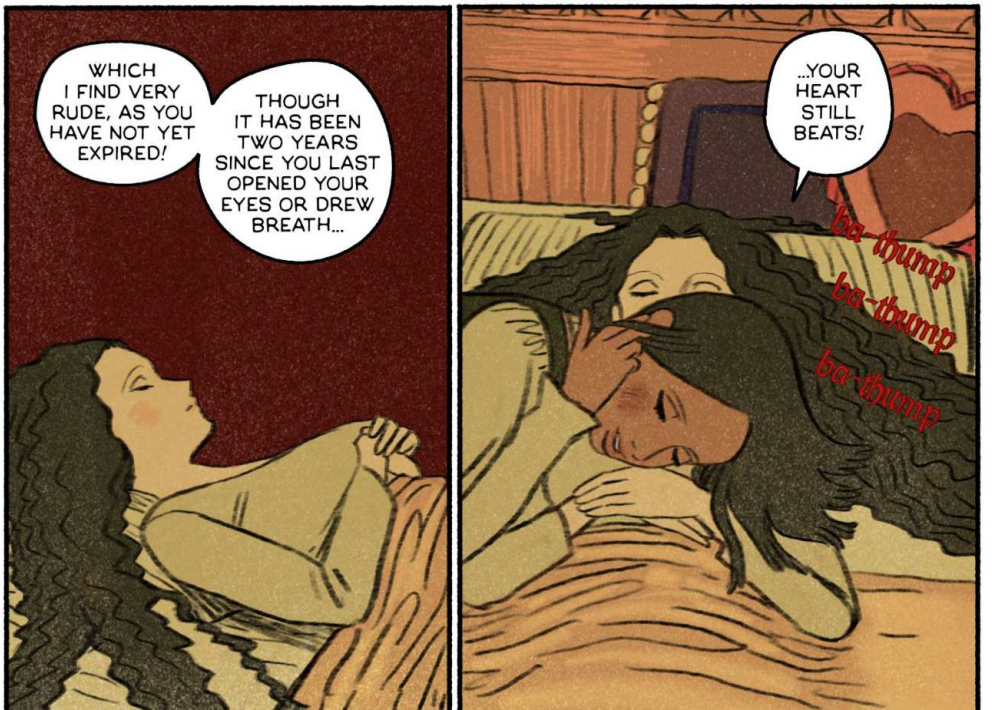
PLEASE SAY HELLO TO GENEVIEVE FOR ME.
NO.
I'D REMIND YOU THAT YOU MAY VISIT HER YOURSELF, MATRON, BUT I KNOW THAT YOU WONT~!


clunk.

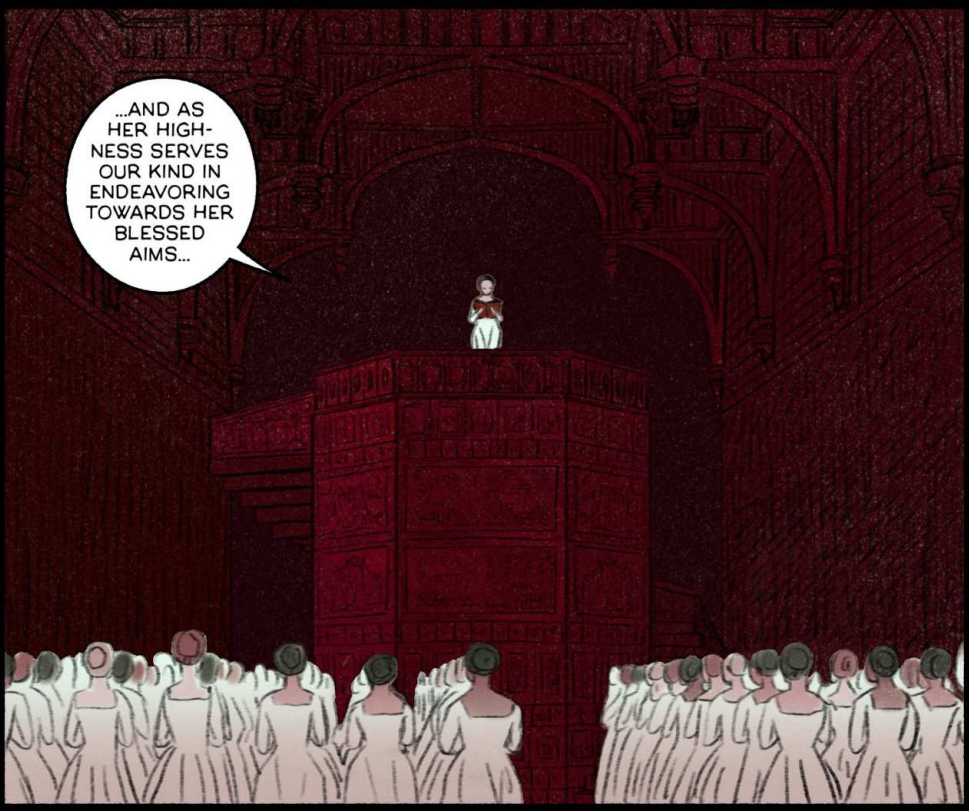
Dorter Beiony
HM. IT WOULD FEEL A BIT RUDE TO PUT TILLY ABOVE THIS BED...
...AS IT NOW BELONGS TO YOU, GENEVIEVE.

SO I SHALL PUT HERRRR... WITH AGNES! AS THEY WERE ALWAYS VERY CLOSE.
THERE.
WHAT DO YOU THINK, TOO GRUESOME? BUT THEY'RE VERY LOVELY PICTURES.
I COULDN'T HELP MYSELF.
IF THERE'S ANY CHANCE THEIR WANDERING GHOSTS REMAIN IN THIS ROOM, I'M SURE THEY'D LIKE TO SEE THEIR ETCHINGS.
I WOULD ABSOLUTELY WANT TO SEE MINE IF I WERE DEAD!
paf
DO YOU THINK THEY WOULD FLATTER ME IN MY DEPICTION?
IF REPUTATION DICTATES SUCH THINGS, I'M SURE THEY'D MAKE ME INTO A TOAD.

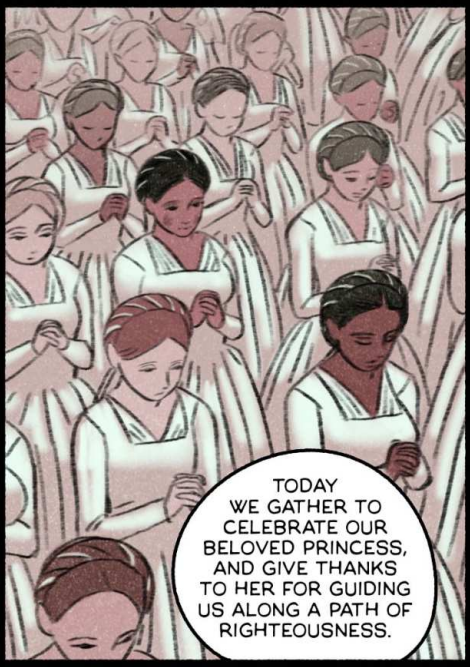
I WAS UNSURE OF WHETHER TO TELL YOU THIS, BUT I THINK IT RIGHT TO DO.
THEY'VE MADE ONE FOR YOU AS WELL.


WHICH I FIND VERY RUDE, AS YOU HAVE NOT YET EXPIRED!
THOUGH IT HAS BEEN TWO YEARS SINCE YOU LAST OPENED YOUR EYES OR DREW BREATH...
...YOUR HEART STILL BEATS!
ba-thump
ba-thump
ba-thump

IF YOU ARE ONLY HALF-DEAD, THEN THEY SHOULD HAVE ONLY MADE YOU HALF A GRAVE BRASS, AT MOST~
BUT I SUPPOSE WHEN YOU WAKE YOU'LL BE ABLE TO SEE YOUR OWN ETCHING. AND THAT I SHALL GREATLY ENVY YOU FOR!
TWO YEARS... AND ALL THOSE GIRLS WHO WORSHIPPED YOU HAVE STAYED FAR AWAY.
ALL THAT TALK ABOUT FOLLOWING YOU ANYWHERE, AND NONE HAVE COME TO SEE YOU ONCE.
I'M SORRY THAT THERE IS ONLY ME, SOMEONE YOU HARDLY KNEW...
BUT I TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOU, DON'T I?


...AND AS HER HIGHNESS SERVES OUR KIND IN ENDEAVORING TOWARDS HER BLESSED AIMS...

...WE SERVE HER WITHIN HER CLOISTERED HOUSE, FOLLOWING HER EXAMPLE AND COMMANDMENT.


TODAY WE GATHER TO CELEBRATE OUR BELOVED PRINCESS, AND GIVE THANKS TO HER FOR GUIDING US ALONG A PATH OF RIGHTEOUSNESS.

Tragico tecti sirmate coelites
hominum generi damus inferias,
fataque populis ultima passis
canimus tristi carmine naenias.
Haec loca quondam pinguia frugibus
gelida circum fronde virebant,
vernebat humus candida liliis
VERNEBAT HUMUS CANDIDA LILIIS...
spirante per haec rura favonio.
Hic belli geras alta per urbes
setterant celsi moeni a pinnis
hic sparsa crocis atria regum
mollesque toris mollibus aulae.

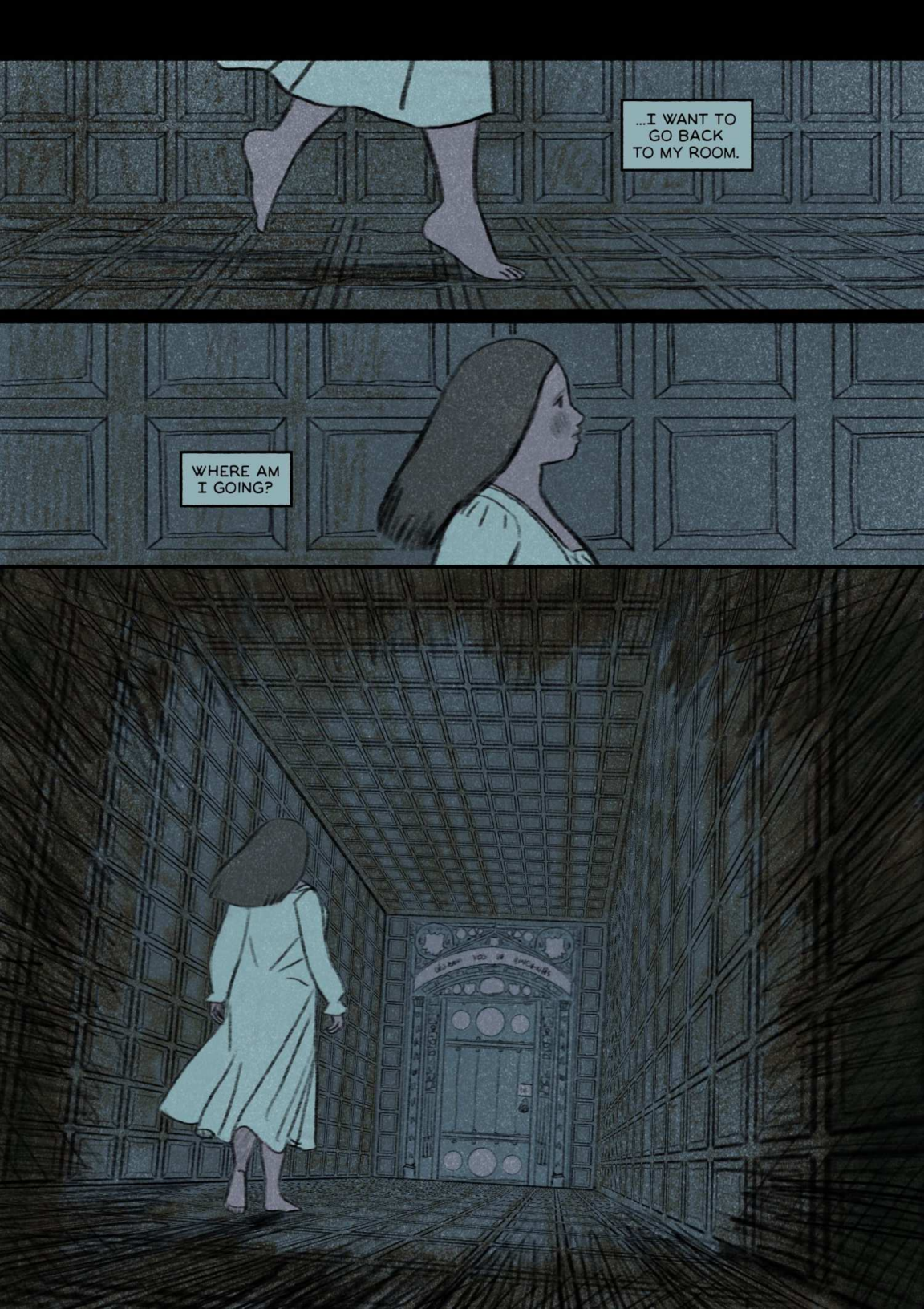
luridus agros fumus obumbrat
cineresque ducum turbinibus incubant.
Viduata gemunt arva colonis
Nunc praecipiti turbine rerum
ambustae jacent omnia flammis

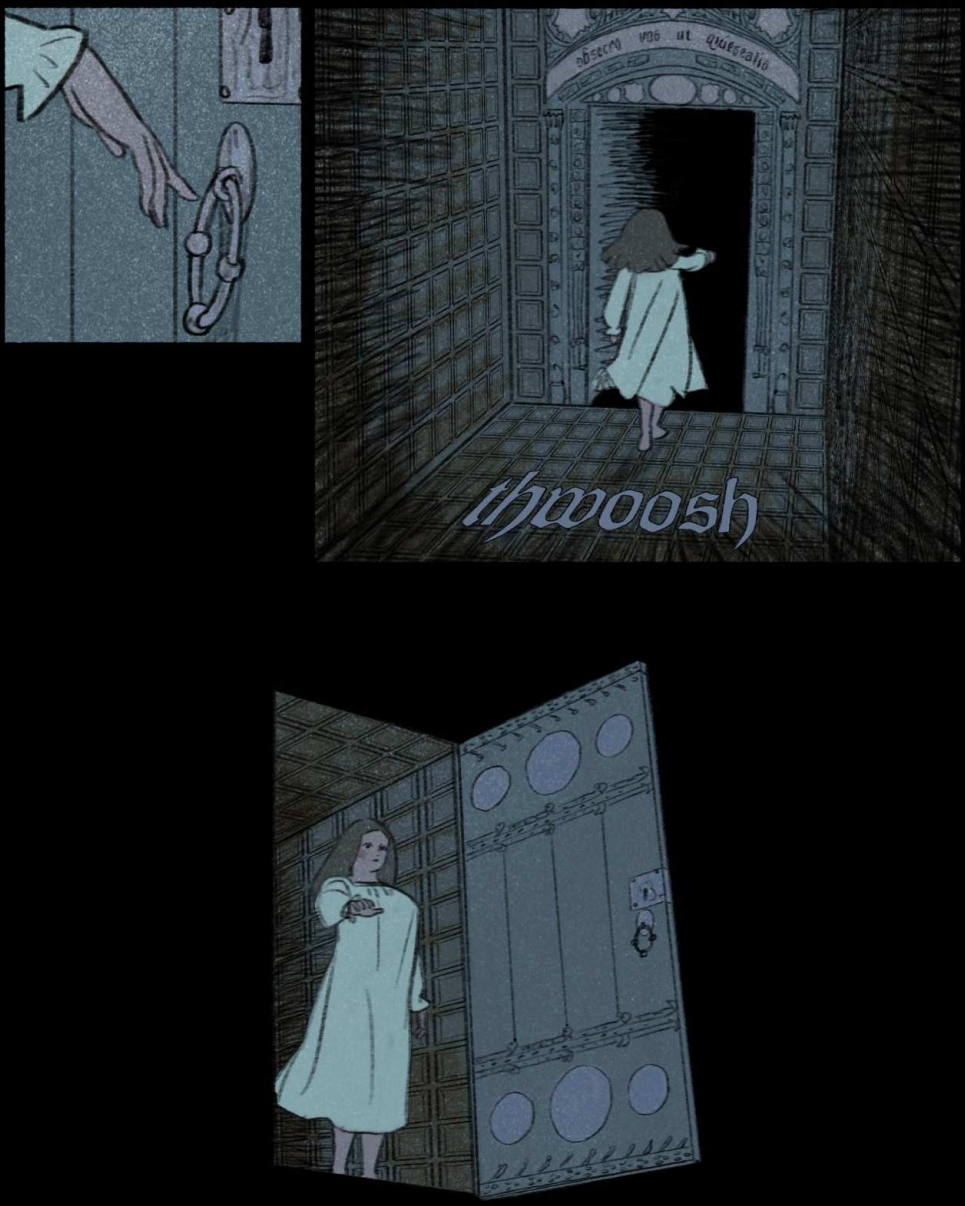
tellusque suos plorat alumnos
GENEVIEVE!!
ABOVE YOU--!
hominum quaestus funera titan

caput horrenti condidit umbra.

SHRIEEEEK!
Swoom!
thud

AH...
I DREAMT ABOUT THAT DAY.
?
I... CANNOT MOVE MY BODY.
OH.
WHERE AM I GOING?


...I WANT TO GO BACK TO MY ROOM.
WHERE AM I GOING?


thwoosh

I CANNOT MOVE.

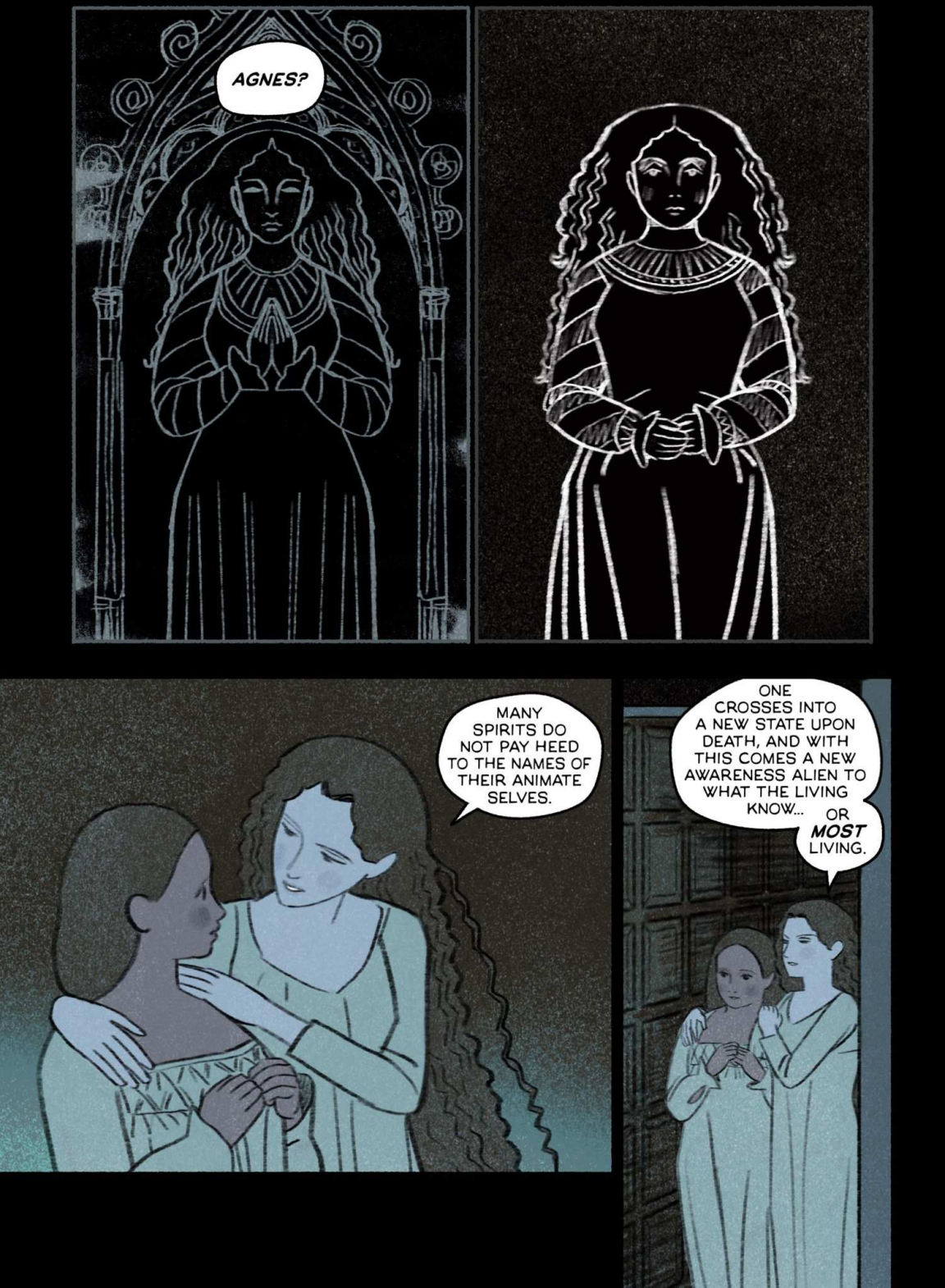
I CANNOT MOVE.

I CANNOT MOVE.
I CANNOT MOVE.
I CANNOT MOVE.

DO NOT TOUCH HER.

!

WHO HAS OPENED THIS DOOR?
IF YOU HAVE A MESSAGE FOR THE GUEST YOU HAVE SUMMONED, GIVE IT TO HER NOW...
...BEFORE MORE VERMIN ATTEMPT TO CRAWL OUT FROM THIS PORTAL OF YOURS.
YOUR REPROACH...
IS MIS-PLACED...


AGNES?
MANY SPIRITS DO NOT PAY HEED TO THE NAMES OF THEIR ANIMATE SELVES.
ONE CROSSES INTO A NEW STATE UPON DEATH, AND WITH THIS COMES A NEW AWARENESS ALIEN TO WHAT THE LIVING KNOW... OR MOST LIVING.

BUT IT IS TRUE...
WHAT STANDS BEFORE YOU NOW IS THE ELEMENT OF THE GIRL YOU KNEW.
WHERE... HAVE YOU COME FROM?
THE LAND WITHOUT ITS QUEEN.
THE REALM OF THE DEAD.
HOW IS IT THAT YOU ARE HERE?
IT HAS BEEN A LONG, COLD AGE SINCE OUR QUEEN BECAME DUST.
WE ARE UNGOVERNED, UNBRIDLED.
THE VEIL IS THIN, AND WE SPILL VENGEFULLY UNTO THE LIVING.

BUT NOT *HERE.*
THE CASTLE IS SACRED, AND YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO REACH IT.
THE CASTLE... IS UNYIELDING. THE HEARTS WITHIN ARE NOT SO.
I COME BEARING A WARNING.

WICKED AIMS HAVE BEEN TAKEN UP AGAINST YOU.
HER FIRST STRIKE SHALL FALL UPON THE MORROW.
LOOK TO HER EMISSARY, AND IT SHALL APPEAR BEFORE YOU.
THIS IS ALL I KNOW.
TSK. WHAT, THAT'S ALL?
!!
AGNES--

CAREFUL. STAY BACK FROM THE EDGE.
PLEASE.
...ARE YOU SUFFERING?
...
NO.

AH--
?!
WAIT.

HA...
HA...
Swip
clack
tmp
tmp
GENEVIEVE...?

ba-thump
ba-thump
ba-thump
THANK YOU FOR PROTECTING ME.
A WARNING...

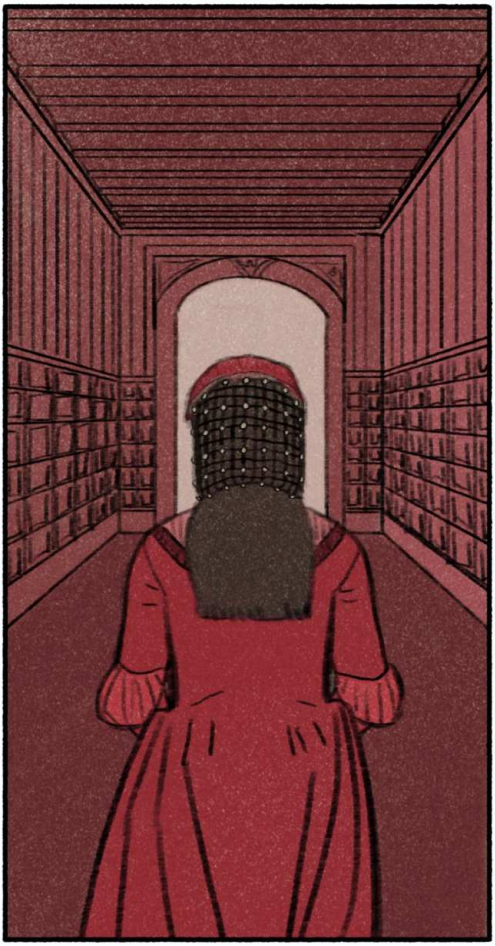
THERE IS NO REASON I SHOULDN'T BELIEVE IT.
WHEN THE CURSE WAS LAID UPON GENEVIEVE, I SAW IT REACH TO HER BEFORE SHE GAVE WAY TO IT.
ONLY I COULD SEE THOSE GHASTLY FLYING WOMEN...

...BUT HER BE-WITCHMENT WAS PROOF ENOUGH TO ME THAT THEY WERE REAL.
pat
pat
AND BEFORE THAT...
WHEN THERE IS DOOM TO COME, I AM VISITED, ALWAYS.

BUT "WICKED AIMS"...
WHAT REASON COULD ANYONE POSSIBLY HAVE TO TARGET ME?
...
AH.
I AM UNLIKED BY ALL.
BUT IS IT A SIN TO BE FRIENDLESS?? AND... A LITTLE MEAN SPIRITED?? I'VE NEVER HARMED ANYONE--
IT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE JUST STRANGE, URSA.

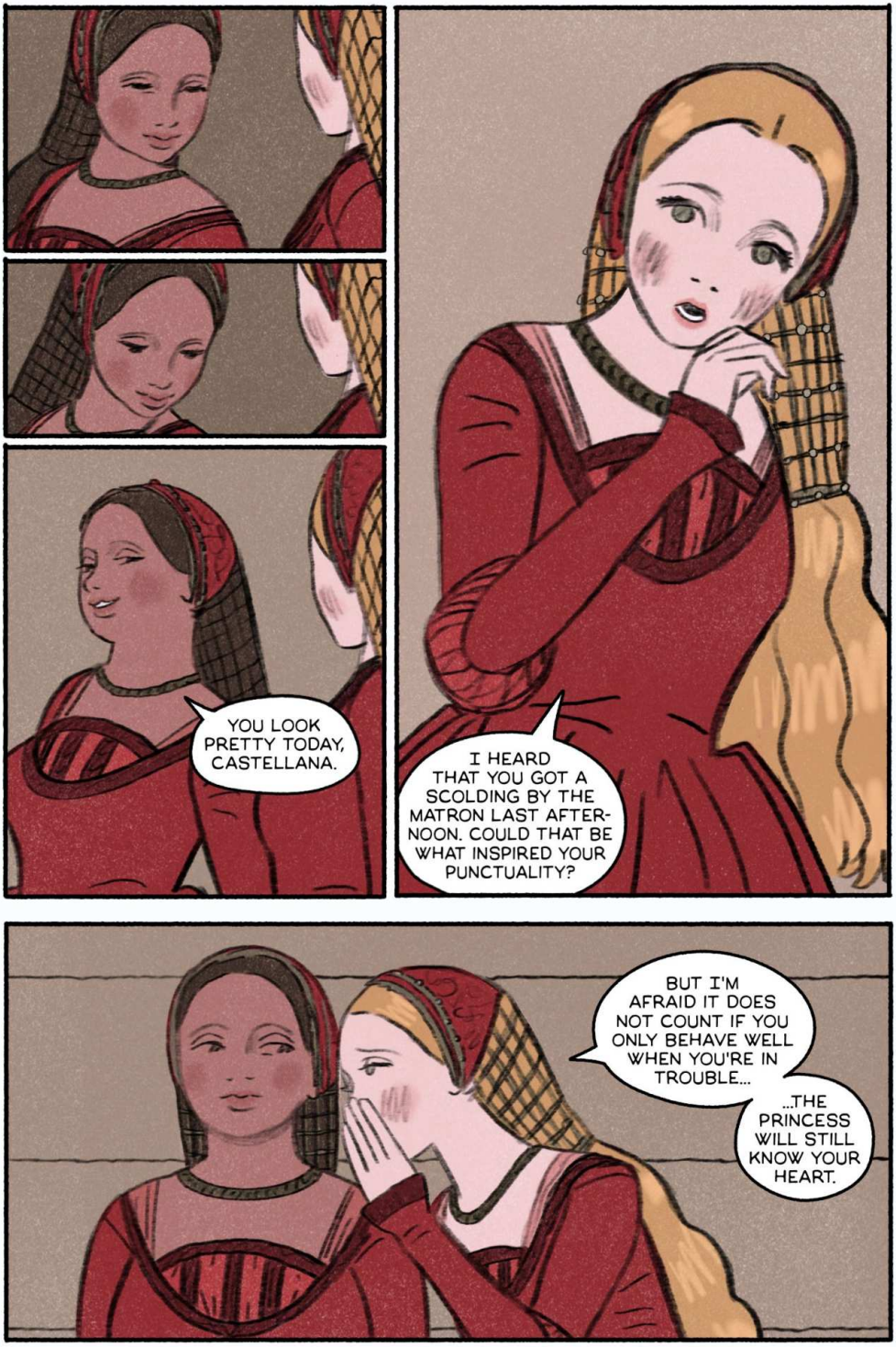
COME NOW.
YOU KNOW I DON'T SAY IT TO BE CRUEL. IF SHE WANTS TO KNOW, I WON'T LEAVE HER WONDERING.
AND DOES IT MATTER SO MUCH?
YOU'RE IN BETONY WITH US, AND WE DON'T MIND TOO BAD. WHO CARES ABOUT THE OTHER GIRLS~!
MAYBE THAT IS WHY THESE CREATURES VISIT UPON ME.
I AM AS STRANGE AS THEY ARE.

HER EMISSARY... SHALL APPEAR BEFORE ME...
AND THEN WHAT AM I TO DO?
... WILL I DIE?
I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW THE DEAD *HAD* A QUEEN.



OH MY!

URSA OF BETONY, ON TIME FOR GRAND CALL.
WHAT A SHOCK... DID SOMETHING HAPPEN?


YOU LOOK PRETTY TODAY, CASTELLANA.
I HEARD THAT YOU GOT A SCOLDING BY THE MATRON LAST AFTERNOON. COULD THAT BE WHAT INSPIRED YOUR PUNCTUALITY?
BUT I'M AFRAID IT DOES NOT COUNT IF YOU ONLY BEHAVE WELL WHEN YOU'RE IN TROUBLE...
...THE PRINCESS WILL STILL KNOW YOUR HEART.

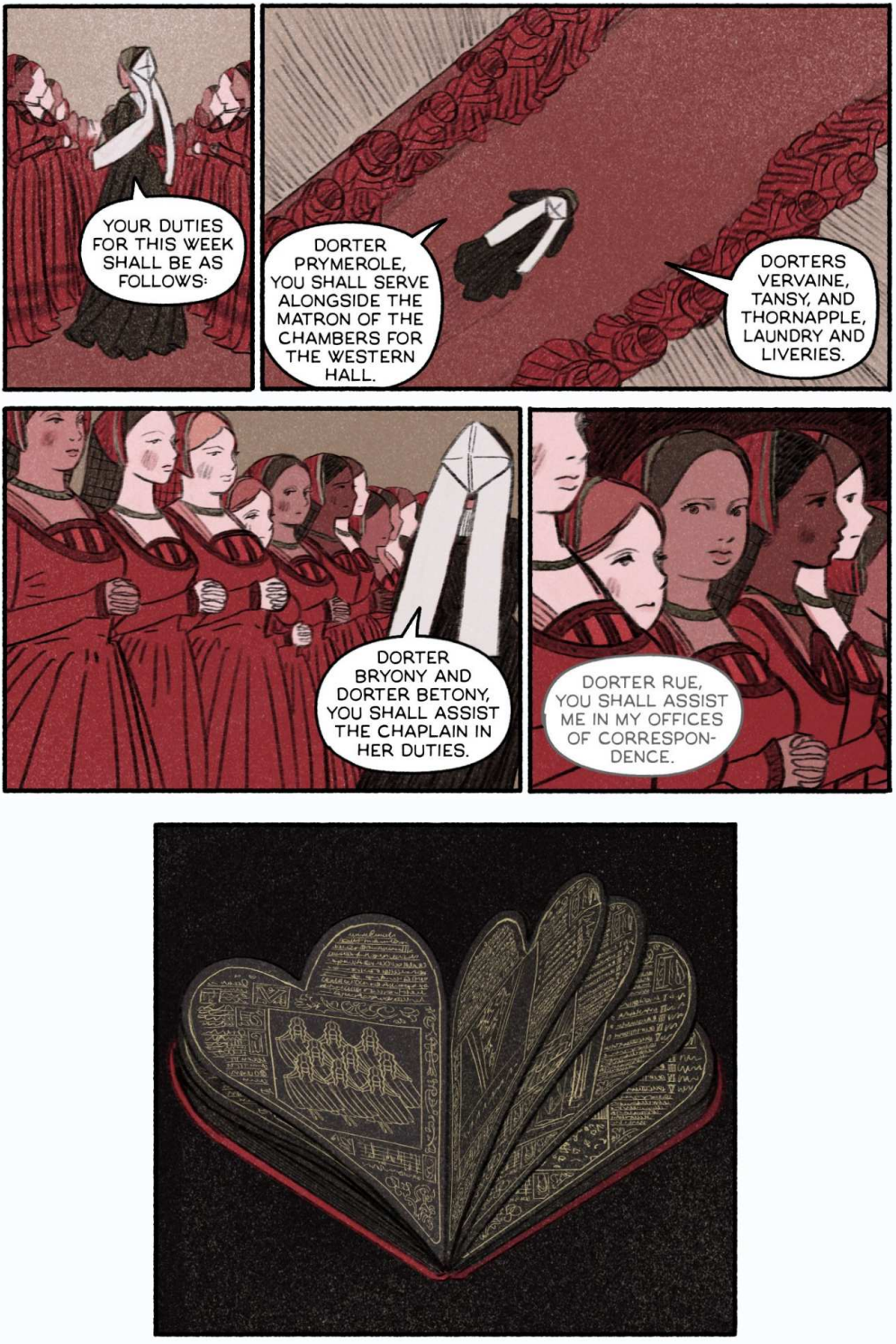
AH! MAYBE YOU WILL BE SAFE -- YOU'VE GOTTEN AWAY WITH SO MUCH UNTIL NOW.
squeeze.
I DON'T KNOW HOW YOU DO IT.

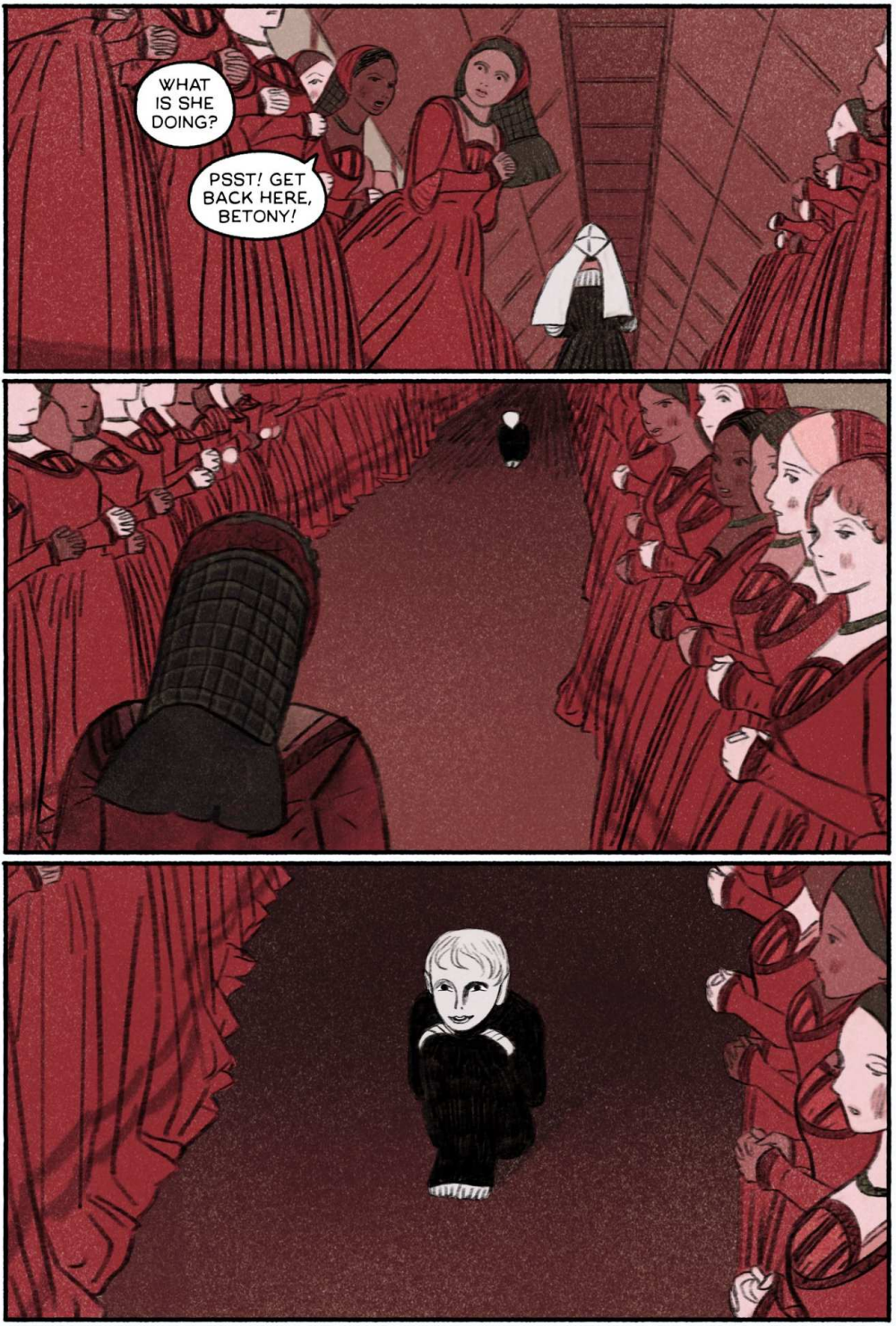
CASTELLANA.
YOU REALLY SHOULDN'T. HAVEN'T I SAID SO ENOUGH TIMES?
A-AH, GENEVIEVE, I--

GENEVIEVE ALWAYS TOLD YOU TO MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS.
SHE'LL BE CROSS WITH YOU ONCE SHE WAKES.
...SHE WON'T WAKE.

HEHE!
SHE WILL.
AND WHEN SHE RETURNS TO YOUR DORTER...
...AND *YOU* ARE NO LONGER THE LITTLE HER-LADYSHIP OF CLUTCH YEW...
...I WONDER IF SHE'LL BE PROUD OF HOW YOU HAVE LED YOUR SISTERS IN HER ABSENCE~
...
YOU'RE *MAD.*
SHE "ALWAYS TOLD" ME... AND HOW WOULD YOU KNOW?
FROM PEERING AT HER FROM THE MARGINS, YOU DEVIA--
LADIES, GOOD MORNING.

HOW GOOD OF YOU ALL FOR BEING PUNCTUAL TO YOUR SUMMONS.
AFTER WE GREET HER HIGHNESS SHORTLY, YOU SHALL BE FREE TO DISPERSE TO THE DUTIES ASSIGNED TO YOUR DORTER.

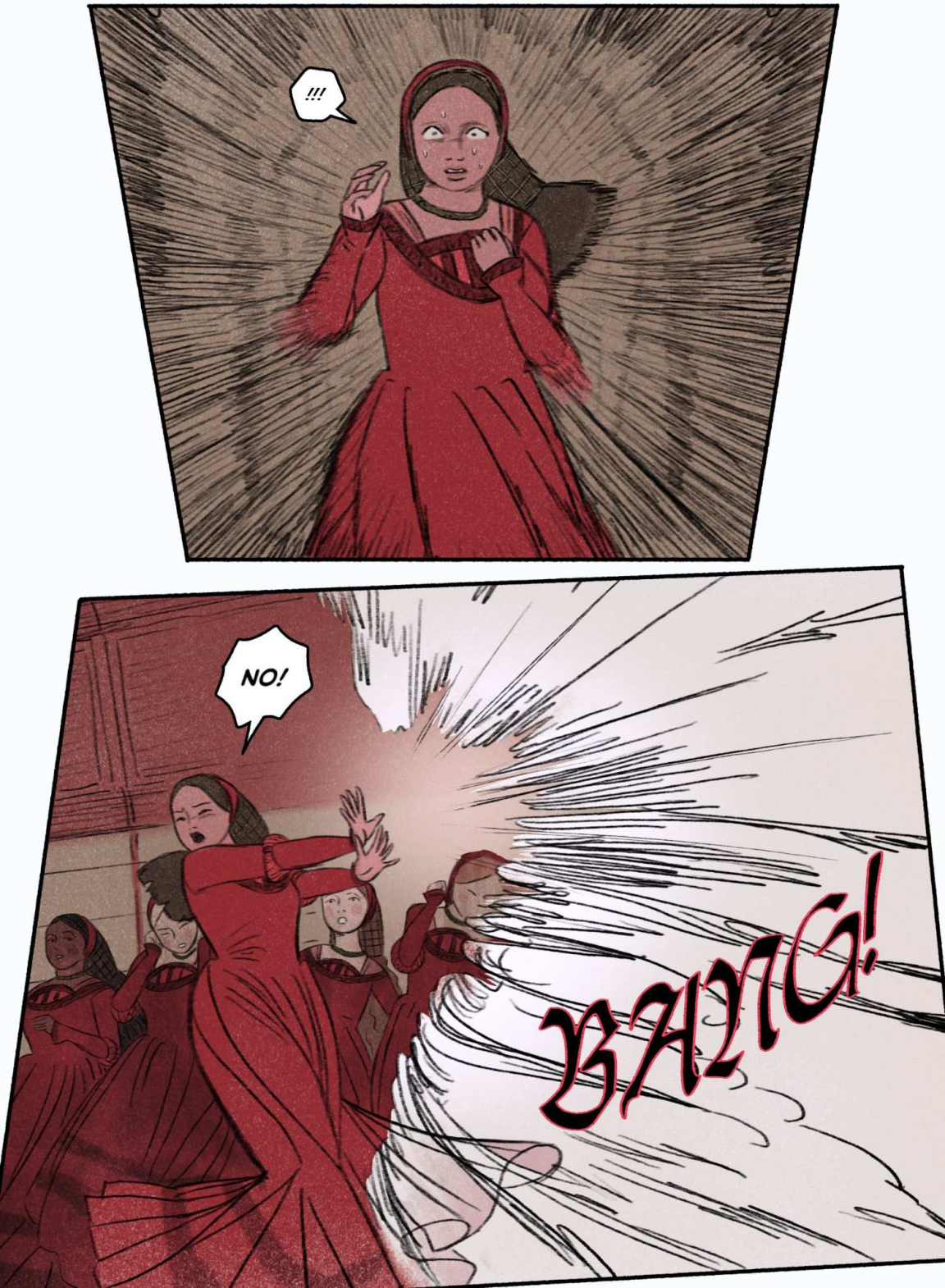

YOUR DUTIES FOR THIS WEEK SHALL BE AS FOLLOWS:
DORTER PRYMEROLE, YOU SHALL SERVE ALONGSIDE THE MATRON OF THE CHAMBERS FOR THE WESTERN HALL.
DORTERS VERVAINE, TANSY, AND THORNAPPLE, LAUNDRY AND LIVERIES.
DORTER BRYONY AND DORTER BETONY, YOU SHALL ASSIST THE CHAPLAIN IN HER DUTIES.
DORTER RUE, YOU SHALL ASSIST ME IN MY OFFICES OF CORRESPON-DENCE.

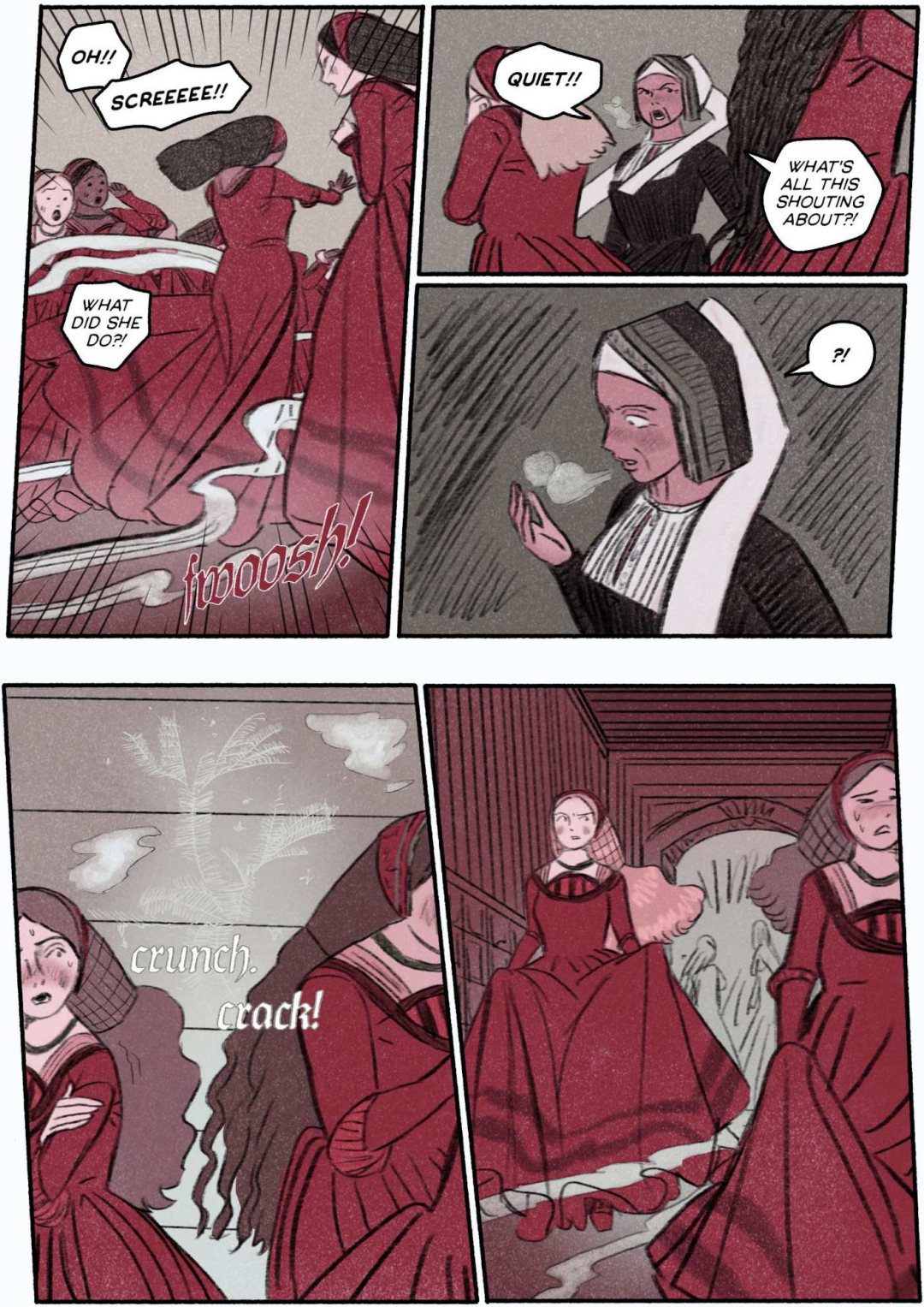

WHAT IS SHE DOING?
PSST! GET BACK HERE, BETONY!

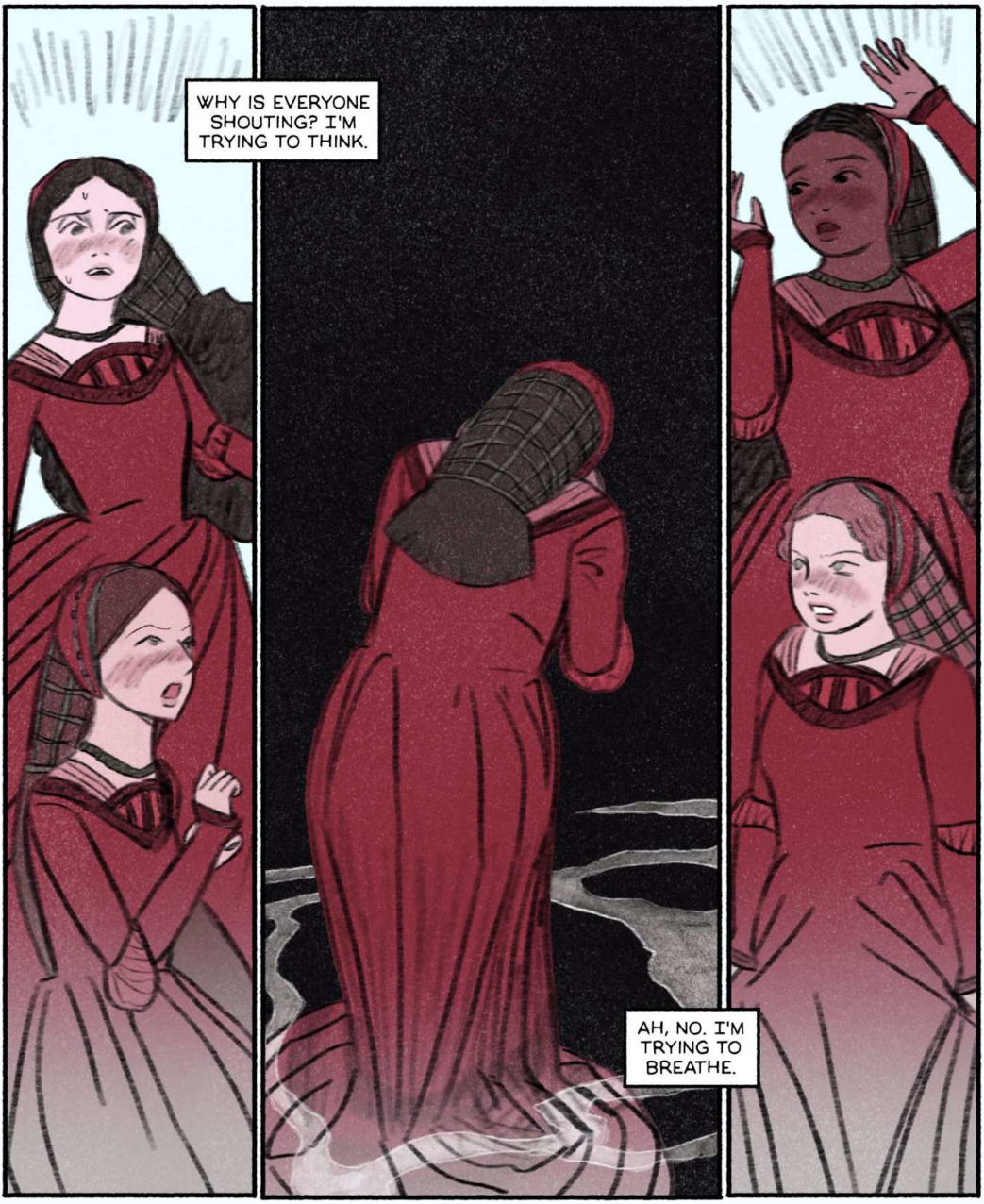
HA...

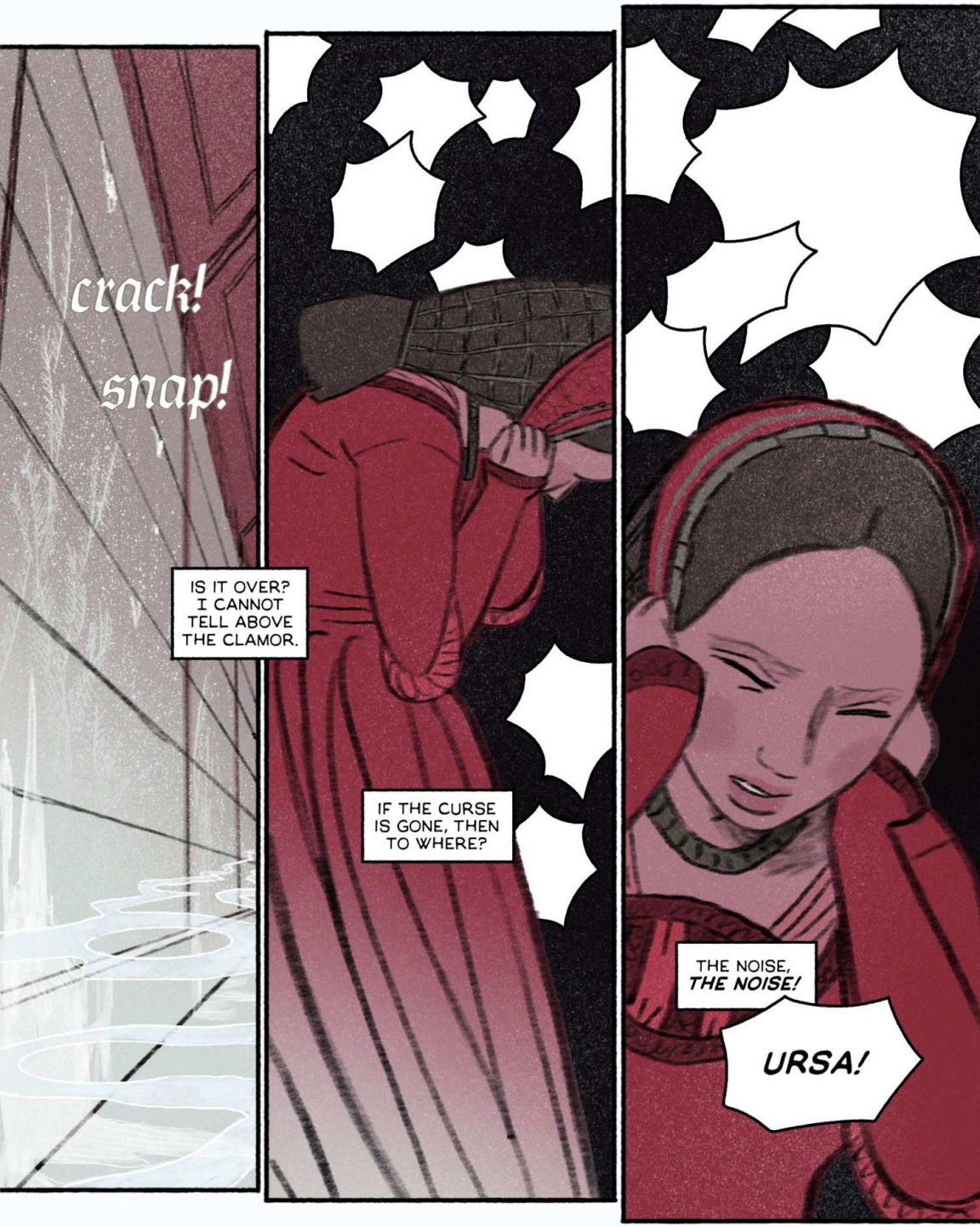
Swishh-

HAA...
fwoip
WHAT WAS THAT WIND?!
FUUOOOOSH
AH!!
HUH?

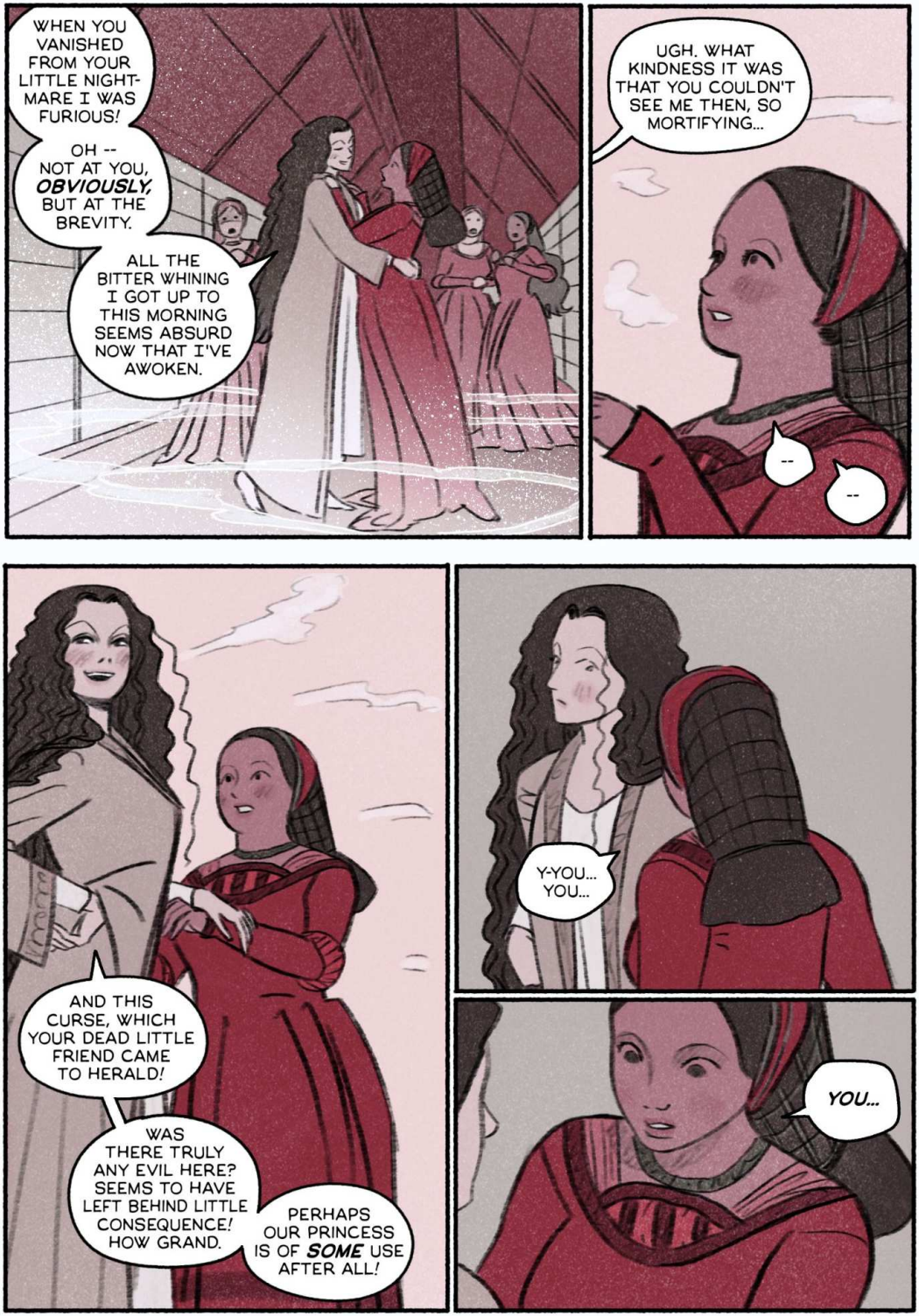

!!!
NO!
BANG!


OH!!
SCREEEEE!!
WHAT DID SHE DO?!
fwooosh!
QUIET!!
WHAT'S ALL THIS SHOUTING ABOUT?!
?!
crunch.
crack!


WHY IS EVERYONE SHOUTING? I'M TRYING TO THINK.
AH, NO. I'M TRYING TO BREATHE.


crack!
snap!
IS IT OVER? I CANNOT TELL ABOVE THE CLAMOR.
IF THE CURSE IS GONE, THEN TO WHERE?
THE NOISE, THE NOISE!
URSA!

HOW SWEET IT IS TO SEE YOU IN THE FLESH!
Y-YOU...! YOU...!
YOU KNOW MY NAME.
HA! OF COURSE I DO.
WE'VE SPENT TWO YEARS TO-GETHER!


WHEN YOU VANISHED FROM YOUR LITTLE NIGHTMARE I WAS FURIOUS!
OH -- NOT AT YOU, OBVIOUSLY, BUT AT THE BREVITY.
ALL THE BITTER WHINING I GOT UP TO THIS MORNING SEEMS ABSURD NOW THAT I'VE AWOKEN.
UGH. WHAT KINDNESS IT WAS THAT YOU COULDN'T SEE ME THEN, SO MORTIFYING...
--
--
AND THIS CURSE, WHICH YOUR DEAD LITTLE FRIEND CAME TO HERALD!
WAS THERE TRULY ANY EVIL HERE? SEEMS TO HAVE LEFT BEHIND LITTLE CONSEQUENCE! HOW GRAND.
PERHAPS OUR PRINCESS IS OF SOME USE AFTER ALL!
Y-YOU... YOU...
YOU...

YOUR FEET... WILL GET COLD...
HA HA HA HA HA!

MY GOD... GENEVIEVE...
OH, HEAVEN!
HA HA HA! YOU'RE SO SWEET!
YOU SHOULD NOT WORRY ABOUT ME!
IS IT REALLY HER?! SHE SEEMS SO...

SHE'S BEEN CURED, IT IS A MIRACLE!
WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?! SHE'S RISEN FROM THE DEAD!

GENEVIEVE! ARE YOU HURT?
SOME-THING'S WRONG!
UGH, YOU SOUND RIDICULOUS.
SKREEEE!
IS THAT REALLY YOU?!
IT'S THE CURSE! THE CURSE!!

squeeze.
RIGHT, THAT'S ENOUGH!
MOVE!
shfft

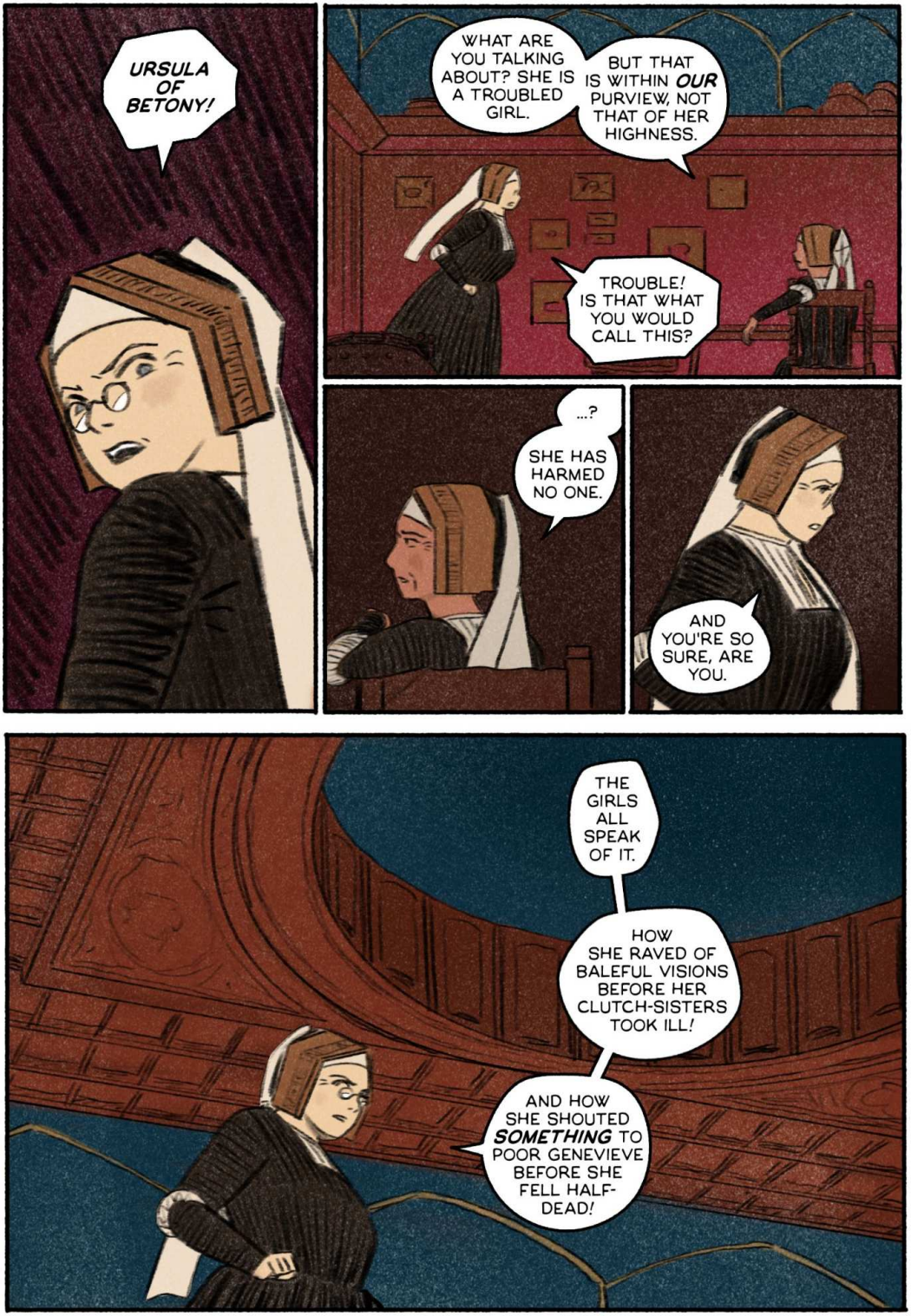
OUT OF THE WAY!
SHOO, DAMN IT! SCATTER!
HA HA HA!
NOW, WHICH WAY WAS IT BACK TO OUR CHAMBERS, URSA...?

WAS THAT...?!
IT *CAN'T* BE HER, GENEVIEVE WOULD *NEVER* ACT THAT WAY!!
THIS IS ALL MAD-NESS.

THE COLD IS BITING AT ME, I WANT TO BE DISMISSED!!
LEAVE, THEN!!

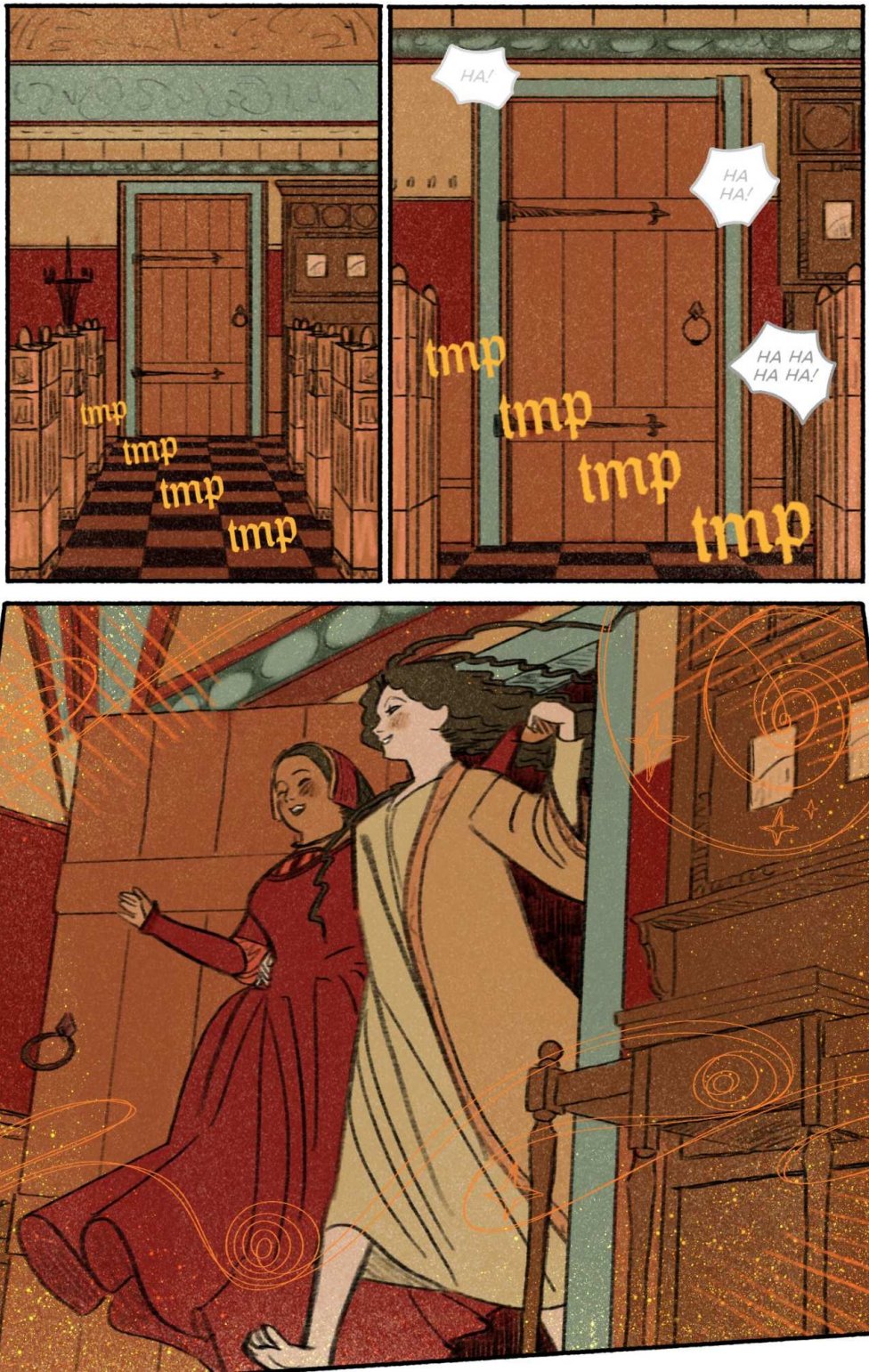
slam!

MATRON MELIORA.
IT IS CHAOS.
THAT GIRL... THAT GIRL!
THE MAIDENS ARE TERRIFIED, ALL OF THEM! HOW COULD THIS BE ALLOWED TO GO ON IN OUR CASTLE! AND THE PRINCESS DOES NOTHING TO PUNISH HER?! NOT EVEN NOW?!
WHO?
bang bang!
MATRONS, WHAT IS HAPPENING?!
IS IT TRUE--
QUIET! BACK TO THE DORTER WITH YOU ALL!
PUNISH WHO?
slam!


URSULA OF BETONY!
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? SHE IS A TROUBLED GIRL.
BUT THAT IS WITHIN OUR PURVIEW, NOT THAT OF HER HIGHNESS.
TROUBLE! IS THAT WHAT YOU WOULD CALL THIS?
...?
SHE HAS HARMED NO ONE.
AND YOU'RE SO SURE, ARE YOU.
THE GIRLS ALL SPEAK OF IT.
HOW SHE RAVED OF BALEFUL VISIONS BEFORE HER CLUTCH-SISTERS TOOK ILL!
AND HOW SHE SHOUTED SOMETHING TO POOR GENEVIEVE BEFORE SHE FELL HALF-DEAD!

AND NOW MAGIC LAYS ITSELF UPON THIS MORNING'S GRAND CALL, HER AT ITS CENTER!
WHAT ELSE ARE WE TO THINK, IF NOT THAT SHE CONSPIRES WITH THE SPIRITS!
... YOU ARE SWAYED BY RUMORS SPREAD AMONGST FRIGHTENED YOUNG WOMEN.
IT IS A GRAVE THING TO ACCUSE ONE OF WITCH-CRAFT.
AND IF SUCH EVIL WAS IN URSA, FREE AMONGST US, THE PRINCESS WOULD INTERVENE.

WELL IT IS IN SOME-ONE, MELIORA! WE HAVE SEEN IT!! SO WHY DOES HER HIGHNESS STAY HER HAND?!
... IT MUST BE A TEST.


tmp
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tmp
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HA!
HA HA!
HA HA HA HA!
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tmp
tmp
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YOU'RE AWAKE! YOU REALLY ARE!
BUT YOU STILL DO NOT BREATHE!
FUNNY, ISN'T IT?
ba-thump! ba-thump! ba-thump! ba-thump!
IS IT?
HA HA!
OH! BUT WHAT OF YOUR CLUTCH!
WILL YOU NOT RETURN TO DORTER YEW?
SO, YOU'D CAST ME OUT?!
OH NO, NO!!
BUT THEY MUST MISS YOU, AND YOU THEM!

YES YES YES, YOU'VE MUSED ALOUD BEFORE ABOUT THE DAY I'D LEAVE YOU FOR YEW.
OH... YOU REALLY COULD HEAR ME...
BUT I DON'T WANT TO LEAVE.
WHAT INTEREST HAVE I IN THOSE SHALLOW GIRLS? AND SHALLOW THEY ARE...
crash!!
MY TIME HAS BEEN MUCH BETTER SPENT WITH A SWEET GIRL LIKE URSA OF BETONY.
YOU REALLY COULD HEAR ME.

IF YOU WERE HERE, THEN SO WAS I, YES.
IN OUR CHAMBERS, SAT ALONGSIDE MY LIVING BODY.

AND THE REST OF YOUR WAKING HOURS WERE SPENT *AWAY* FROM THE CASTLE.
AWAY FROM THE CASTLE?!

YES! THERE IS MUCH TO LEARN ABOUT *THIS* WORLD FROM THE ONE *BENEATH* IT.

WITH THE DEAD!!

YES, WITH THE DEAD!

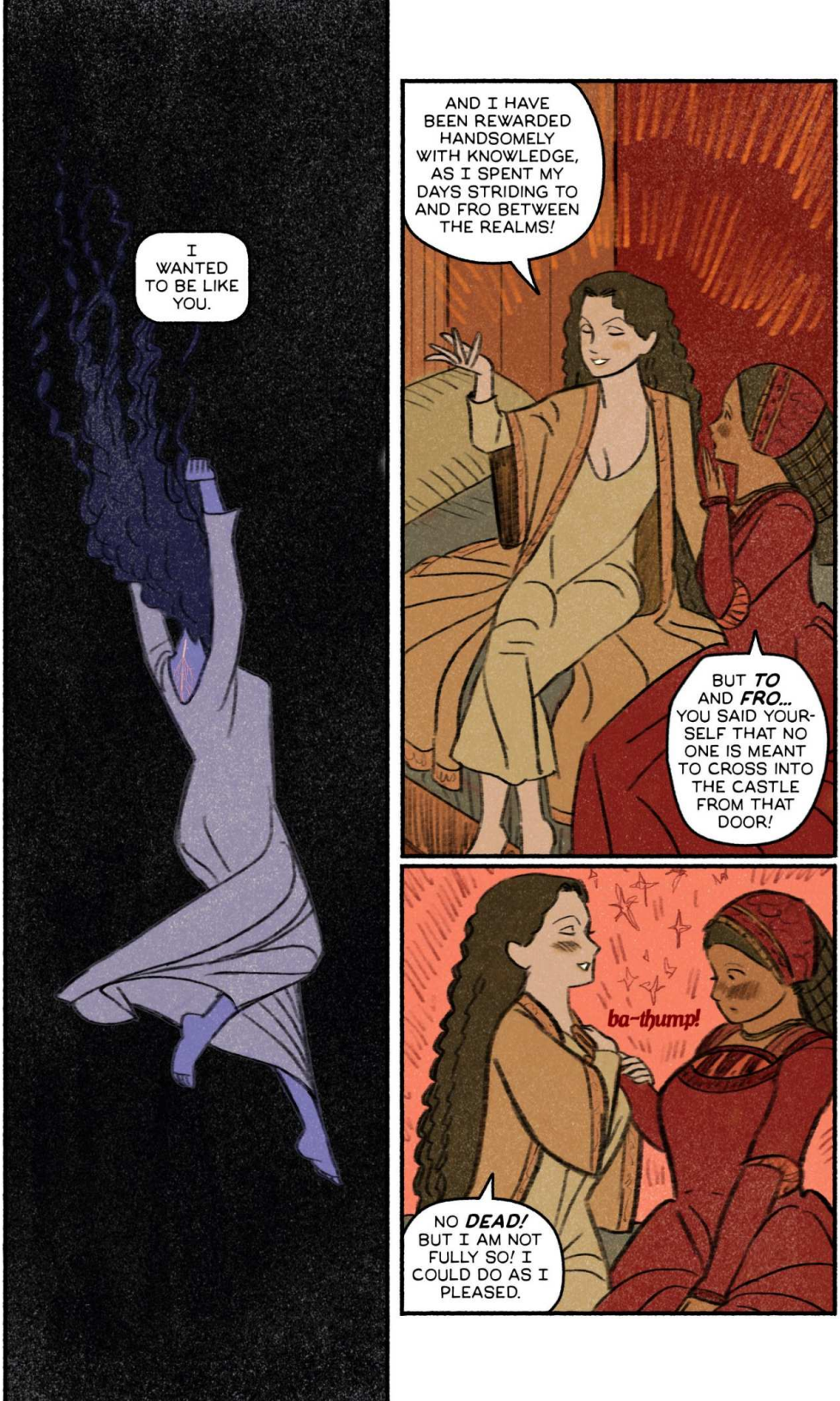
AND WHAT A REALM IT IS, A TWISTING, WRITHING KINGDOM!
ALL THE MORE SO NOW THAT IT LIES WITHOUT A GOD- QUEEN...
EVERY NIGHT, I'D CRAWL BACK UP THE DARK, AND THROUGH THE DOOR -- YOU KNOW IT, YES?
"OBSECRO VOS," ET CETERA...
...!
...!
IN PERFECT TIME FOR YOU TO RETIRE, WHEN YOU WOULD TELL ME ALLLLL ABOUT YOUR DOINGS.
MEETING EACH OTHER IN OUR HOME AFTER OUR DAYS' MISSIONS, TO GOSSIP TOGETHER...
AS THOUGH WE TWO WERE HUSBAND AND WIFE, HEH HEH~
YOU REALLY COULD HEAR ME!
YES, LITTLE SWEETING. HOW ELSE WOULD I HAVE KEPT MY MIND AND SOUL, BOUND TO HALF-LIFE AS I WAS? HA!

FOR A TIME, THERE WERE ONLY THE HOURS WITH YOU...
...AND THE HOURS WHERE I WAS ALONE.
BUT URSA... DID YOU KNOW THAT YOU LIVE IN A STATE OF CURIOSITY?
THAT YOU ARE ALWAYS, ALWAYS BOLD AND HONEST?

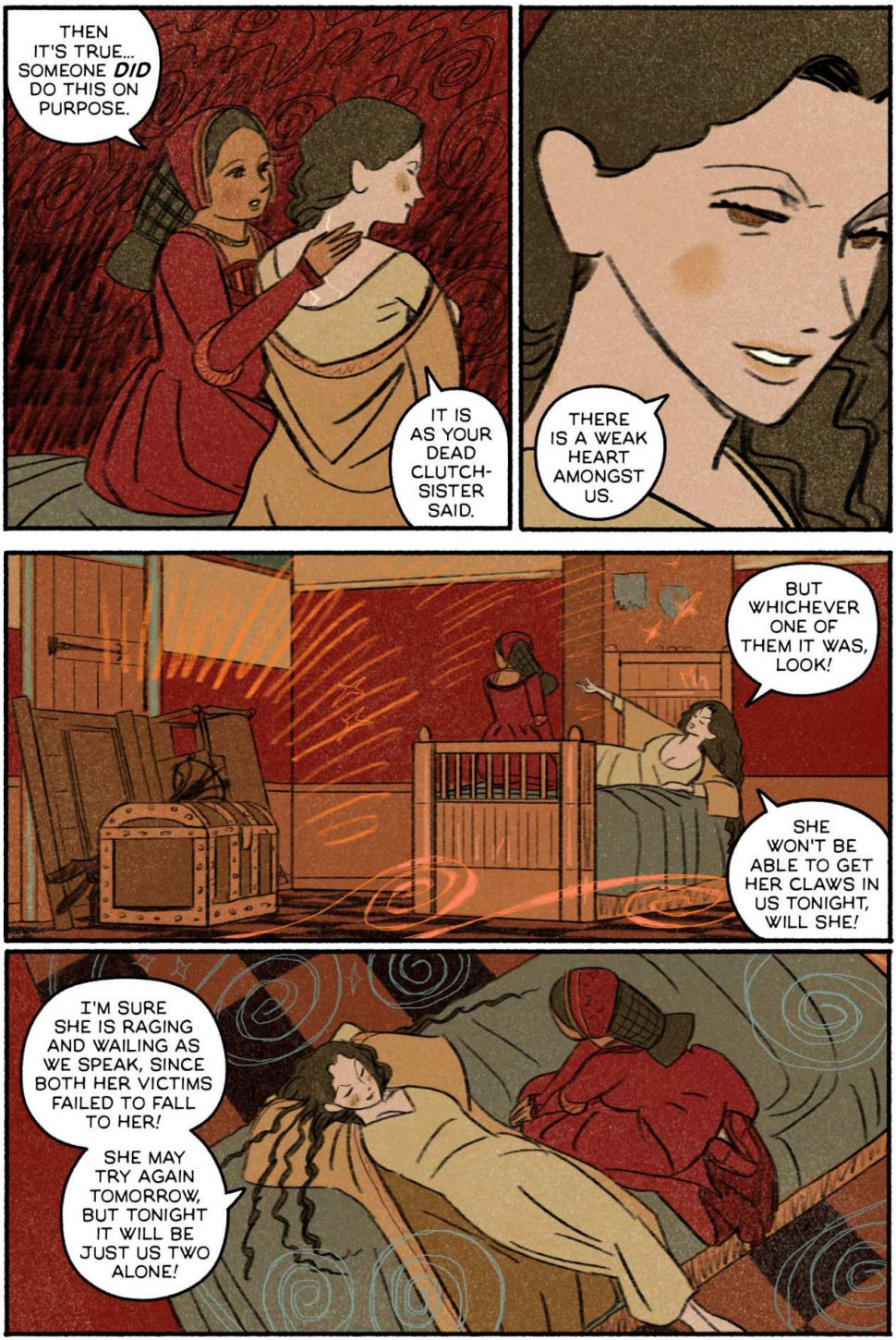
DURING ALL MY YEARS IN THE INNER-MOST CASTLE, I HAVE KEPT UP A STRUGGLE TO RESTRAIN MY UNPRETTY NATURE!
I HAVE STRIVED TO BE CIVIL!

BUT WHY SIT IDLY AS A GHOST AND SUFFER...

WHEN I COULD INSTEAD BE CURIOUS, BOLD, AND HONEST?


I WANTED TO BE LIKE YOU.
AND I HAVE BEEN REWARDED HANDSOMELY WITH KNOWLEDGE, AS I SPENT MY DAYS STRIDING TO AND FRO BETWEEN THE REALMS!
BUT TO AND FRO... YOU SAID YOURSELF THAT NO ONE IS MEANT TO CROSS INTO THE CASTLE FROM THAT DOOR!
ba-thump!
NO DEAD! BUT I AM NOT FULLY SO! I COULD DO AS I PLEASED.

WELL, NOT *QUITE* AS I PLEASED...
IF THIS DOOR WERE TO OPEN NOW, YOU WOULD SEE ALL THE HALLS THAT WEAVE BETWEEN THE DORTERS.
BUT IN MY FORMER STATE, IT OPENED ONLY TO TH PASSAGE YOU SAW IN YOUR DREAM LAST NIGHT, TERMINATING WITH THE PORTAL TO THE UNDERWORLD.
OUR PRINCESS DOES KEEP *SOME* WATCH OVER THE PLACE, DESPITE HER LAZINESS. EVEN A HALF-GHOST CANNOT WANDER COMPLETELY FREELY HERE.
GENEVIEVE... ARE YOU ALLOWED TO TALK LIKE THAT?
IF SHE HAD BEEN A BIT *MORE* LAX, I WOULD HAVE SPENT MY DAYS CREEPING THROUGH OUR CASTLE...
...TRYING TO FIND OUT WHICH WICKED LITTLE GIRL TRIED TO CAST ME TO HELL.


THEN IT'S TRUE... SOMEONE *DID* DO THIS ON PURPOSE.
IT IS AS YOUR DEAD CLUTCH-SISTER SAID.
THERE IS A WEAK HEART AMONGST US.
BUT WHICHEVER ONE OF THEM IT WAS, LOOK!
SHE WON'T BE ABLE TO GET HER CLAWS IN US TONIGHT, WILL SHE!
I'M SURE SHE IS RAGING AND WAILING AS WE SPEAK, SINCE BOTH HER VICTIMS FAILED TO FALL TO HER!
SHE MAY TRY AGAIN TOMORROW, BUT TONIGHT IT WILL BE JUST US TWO ALONE!

BUT WHAT TO DO TOMORROW, THEN?
DEAD FEED ON TOADS AND SNAKES, COULD WE LURE OUT HER EVIL SPIRITS IN THIS WAY?
BUT IT IS A STRUGGLE TO PUT QUESTIONS TO SPIRITS. THEY ARE RAMBLING AND STUPID.
AH-- THE KITCHENS WOULDN'T HAVE THE GOODS WE NEED REGARDLESS. LET ALONE OVENS THAT COOK WITH SULFUR.
IN A BY-GONE AGE, IT WOULD HAVE BEEN ENOUGH TO SIMPLY PRAY FOR MERCY. BUT WITH NO GOD OF THE UNDERWORLD, THERE IS NO ONE TO PRAY TO.
THUS WE REQUIRE THE PROTECTION OF THE PRINCESS, BUT SOME GOOD ***SHE'S*** PROVEN HERSELF!

LEAVING US POOR GIRLS TO FEND FOR--
ISN'T ONE OF THE HALLS DECORATED WITH DEER HIDE?
IF IT'S PROTECTION WE WANT, WE COULD SEW OURSELVES WITHIN THEM AND BIND OURSELVES WITH IRON CHAINS!
BUT! BUT... NO, THIS IS A FIGHT WE MUST TAKE UP, NOT A DEFENSE. WE'LL HAVE TO...
HAVE TO...
... DO YOU THINK THIS THE RAMBLINGS OF A MAD-WOMAN?
I DON'T BLAME YOU AT ALL--
WHAT?

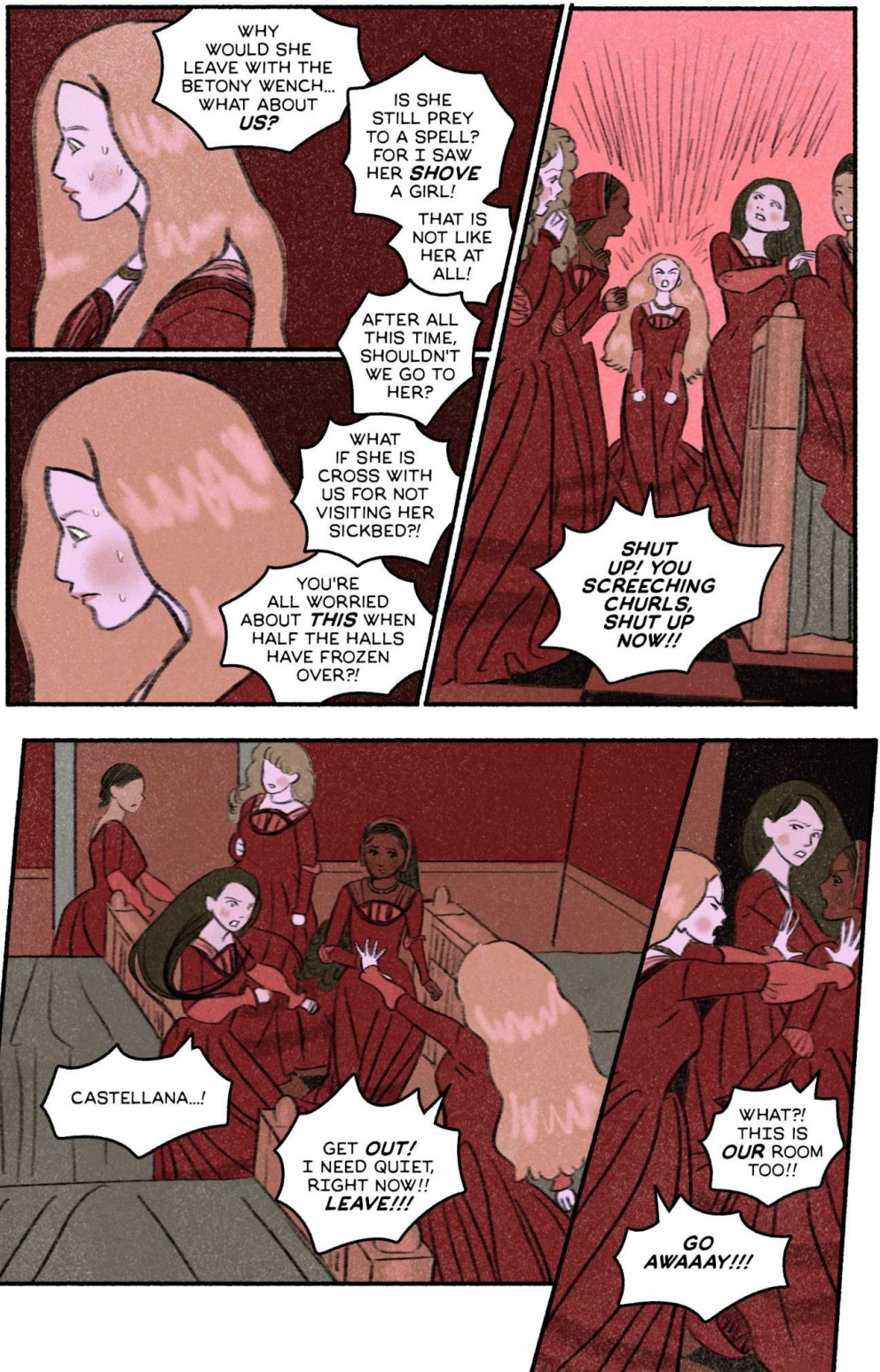
OF COURSE I BELIEVE YOU, GENEVIEVE.

URSA.
YES?
I FIND I AM IN LOVE WITH YOU.

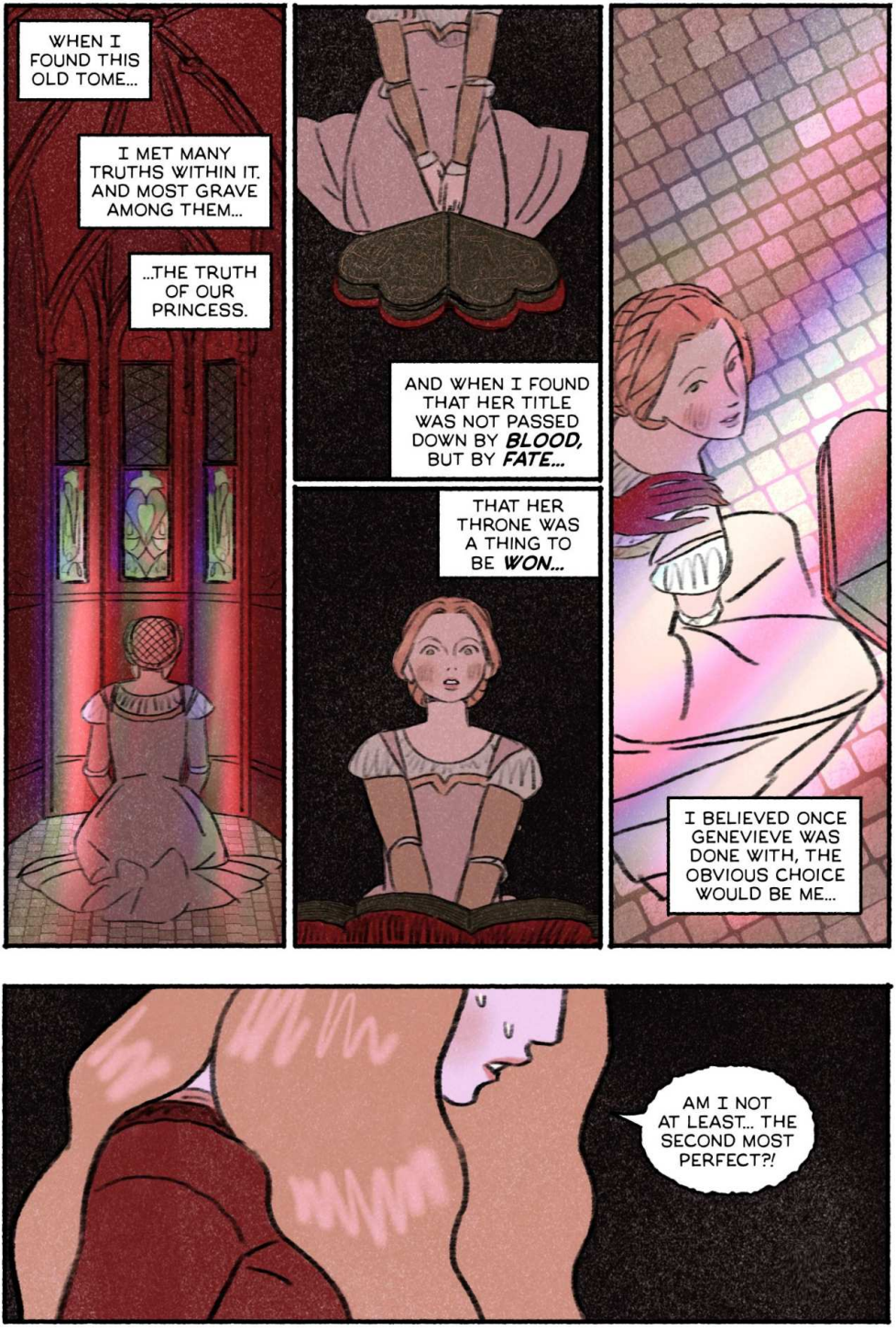
HAHA! WHAT A FACE...
IT HAPPENED DURING MY LONG DREAM OF HALF-DEATH.

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT I HAVE NO EXPECTATION OF AN ANSWER FROM YOU.
BUT I WOULD LIKE TO ASK IF IT'S STILL ALL RIGHT FOR ME TO STAY IN DORTER BETONY--
YES!
YES...

MY THANKS FOR YOUR HOSPITALITY.

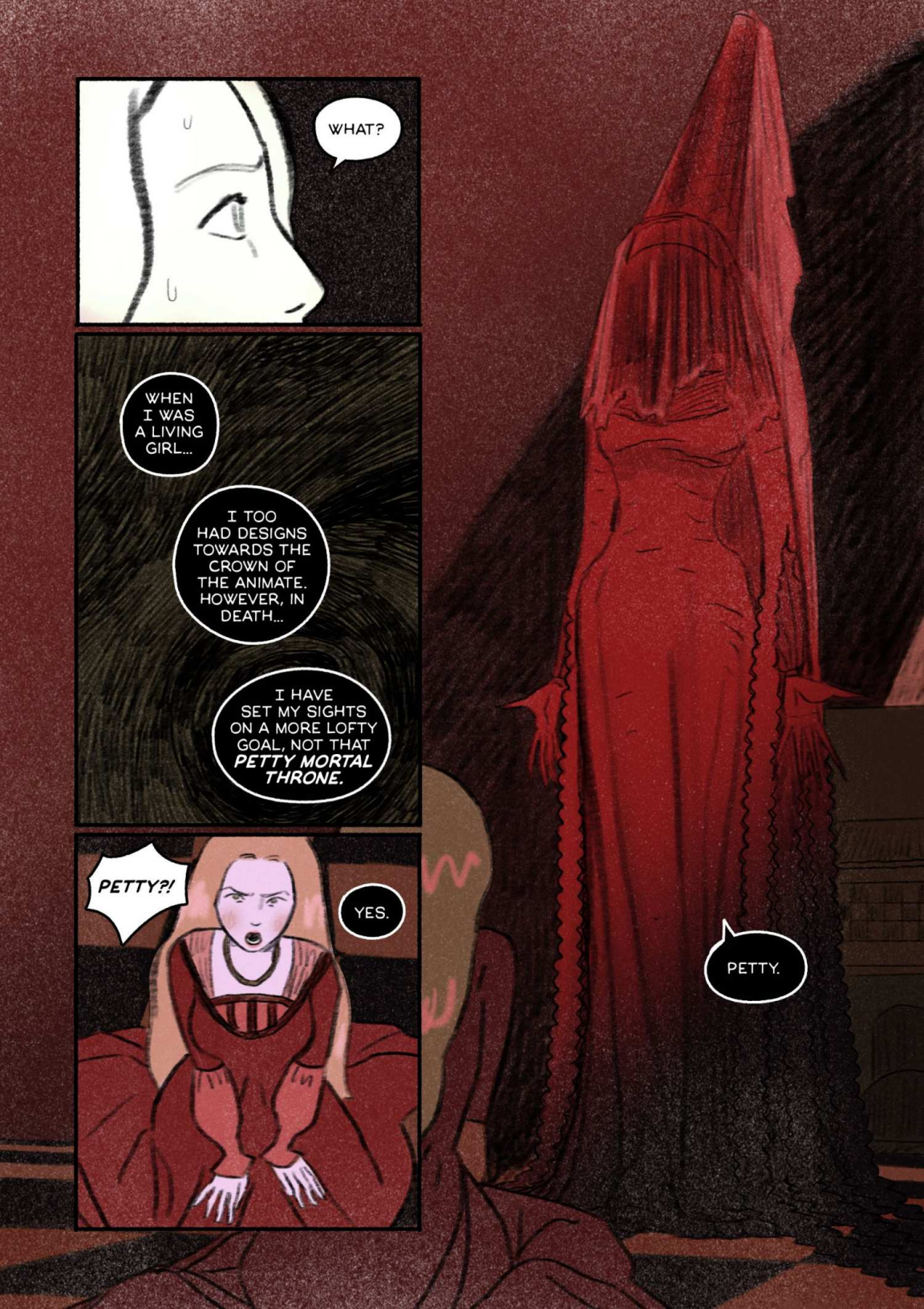

WHY WOULD SHE LEAVE WITH THE BETONY WENCH... WHAT ABOUT *US?*
IS SHE STILL PREY TO A SPELL? FOR I SAW HER *SHOVE* A GIRL!
THAT IS NOT LIKE HER AT ALL!
AFTER ALL THIS TIME, SHOULDN'T WE GO TO HER?
WHAT IF SHE IS CROSS WITH US FOR NOT VISITING HER SICKBED?!
YOU'RE ALL WORRIED ABOUT *THIS* WHEN HALF THE HALLS HAVE FROZEN OVER?!
SHUT UP! YOU SCREECHING CHURLS, SHUT UP NOW!!
CASTELLANA...!
GET *OUT!* I NEED QUIET, RIGHT NOW!! *LEAVE!!!*
WHAT?! THIS IS *OUR* ROOM TOO!!
GO AWAAAY!!!

slam!
shff
THIS STUPID...
fwump!
STUPID BOOK!!

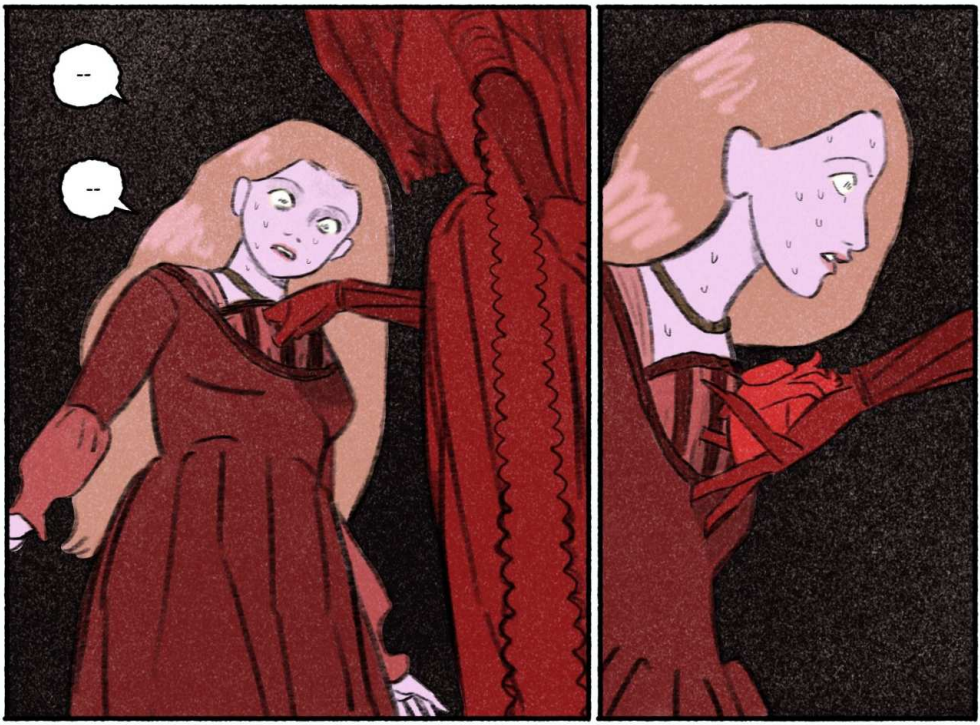

WHEN I FOUND THIS OLD TOME...
I MET MANY TRUTHS WITHIN IT. AND MOST GRAVE AMONG THEM...
...THE TRUTH OF OUR PRINCESS.
AND WHEN I FOUND THAT HER TITLE WAS NOT PASSED DOWN BY BLOOD, BUT BY FATE...
THAT HER THRONE WAS A THING TO BE WON...
I BELIEVED ONCE GENEVIEVE WAS DONE WITH, THE OBVIOUS CHOICE WOULD BE ME...
AM I NOT AT LEAST... THE SECOND MOST PERFECT?!

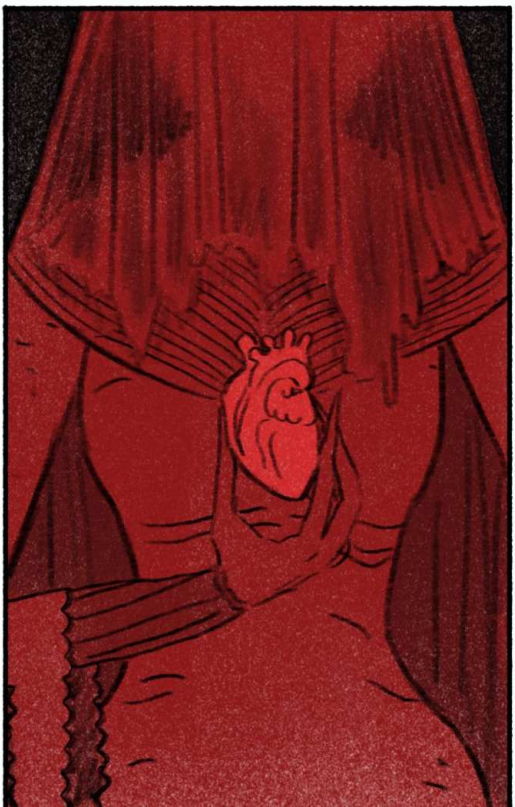
ARRRGH! SHOW YOURSELF, SPIRIT!! EXPLAIN THIS!!
IT WAS PREPOSTEROUS ENOUGH WHEN YOU TOLD ME THAT FREAK URSA STOOD IN MY WAY TOO! AS THOUGH WE WERE ANYWHERE NEAR EQUALS!
BUT WAS IT NOT ALL SUPPOSED TO BE MINE, NOW?! WHY DO THEY BOTH LIVE?!
CASTELLANA.
THE OBJECT OF YOUR JEALOUSY WAKES, YES. BUT WE HAVE NOT YET FAILED.
MY JEALOUSY?! IT IS MUCH MORE THAN THAT NOW!!
IF I'M DISCOVERED... WHAT THEN?!

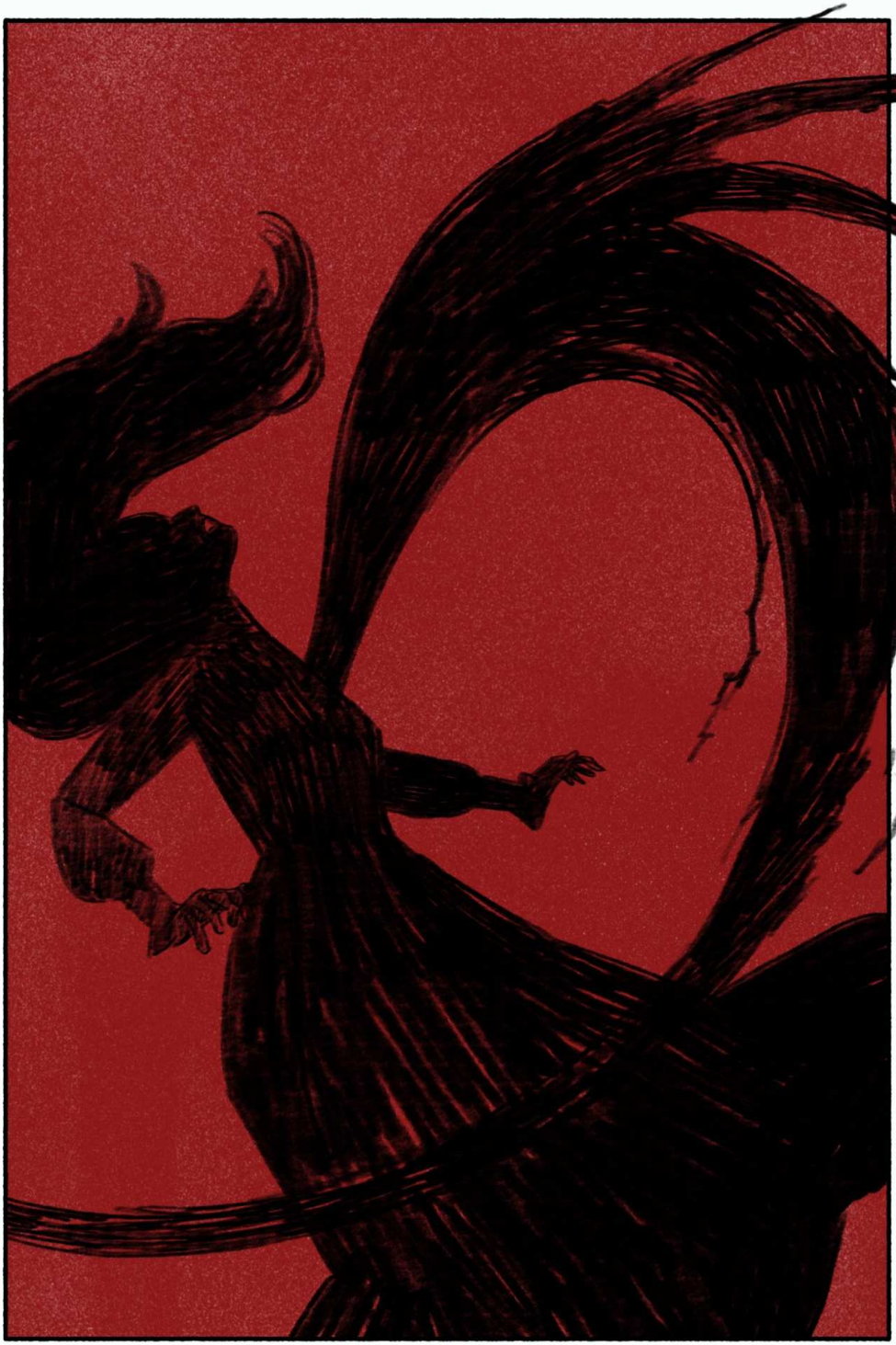
USELESS GRIMOIRE! USELESS GHOST!!
YES, YOU HAVE SOME POTENTIAL TO SUCCEED THE PRINCESS. BUT YOU ARE NOT THE ONLY ONE, NOR ARE YOU THE MOST POWERFUL.
I KNOW, I KNOW!
YOU ARE NOT THE FIRST TO ATTEMPT TO CURSE HER WAY TO THE POSITION, EITHER.
...
BUT YOU ARE...
OF ALL THE AMBITIOUS WOMEN I HAVE KNOWN TO STALK THESE HALLS...
THE MOST STUPID.


WHAT?
WHEN I WAS A LIVING GIRL...
I TOO HAD DESIGNS TOWARDS THE CROWN OF THE ANIMATE. HOWEVER, IN DEATH...
I HAVE SET MY SIGHTS ON A MORE LOFTY GOAL, NOT THAT PETTY MORTAL THRONE.
PETTY?!
YES.
PETTY.

FOR A TIME, I BELIEVED OUR DESIRES WERE IN HARMONY WITH ONE ANOTHER.
BUT I HAVE NO USE FOR YOUR DREAMS ANY LONGER.
tmp
tmp
WHAT DO YOU--
shk







...ME?

ARE YOU SURE?
OF COURSE I'M SURE!
BUT WHY?
HMMM...
BECAUSE YOU'RE VERY PRETTY.
!!!!!
fump!
HEHEHE!!

shfft

skritch
skritch
crunch
clatter
skritch
skritch

skrich
skrich
scrape
scraaape
skrich
ROSCELIN?
skrich
clatter
knock
knock

HELLO? GENEVIEVE? ...URSA?
knock knock
IT IS ME... CASTELLANA...
I VERY MUCH WOULD LIKE TO SPEAK WITH YOU. IT'S BEEN SUCH A LONG TIME SINCE YOU WERE AWAKE, GENEVIVE, AND...
KNOCK KNOCK.
AND I THINK THERE ARE SOME THINGS I OUGHT TO APOLOGIZE FOR. TO BOTH OF YOU. COULD I PLEASE--
NO!
I'M SORRY?

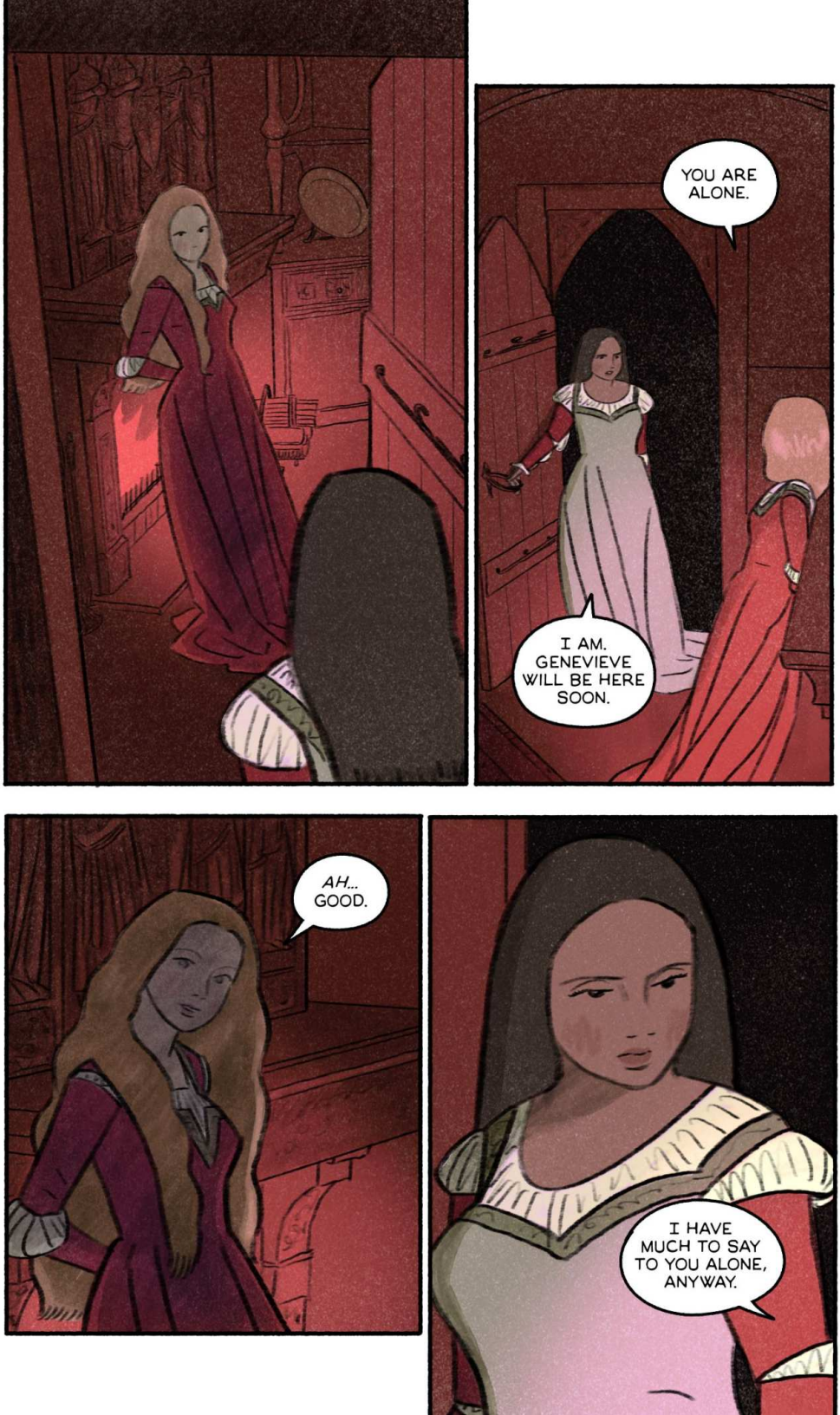
AREN'T YOU A LITTLE TOO SHAMELESS? WHY SHOULD I LET YOU IN?
GENEVIEVE AND I HAVE BEEN CLUTCH SISTERS FOR SO MUCH OF OUR LIVES. HAVE I TRULY NO RIGHT TO SPEAK TO HER NOW?
NONE AT ALL.
...AT LEAST NOT UNANNOUNCED LIKE THIS. IF YOU WANT TO SAY SOMETHING, YOU CAN SAY IT LATER. TONIGHT.
WE WILL MEET YOU...
IN THE LITTLE PARLOR NEAR DORTER YEW.
...DON'T YOU THINK THIS IS SILLY?

BANG!
BANG!
BANG!
BANG
BANG
BANG
BANG!
OH... I UNDER-STAND.
TONIGHT, THE PARLOR.

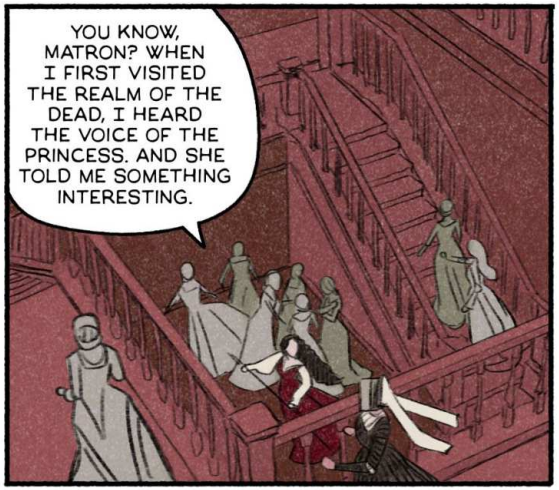
A SPIRIT MIGHT HAVE MIMICKED HER TO TRICK US. OR...?
NO. THAT WAS CASTELLANA.
YOU'RE CERTAIN IT WAS NO ILLUSION?
I'M NOT SURE HOW... BUT YES, I'M CERTAIN.
WELL THEN.
WE HAVE OUR VILLAIN, DON'T YOU THINK?
NOD
AND PLENTY OF TIME TO PLOT A MEANS TO HER DEFEAT.
THAT ROTTEN GIRL. SHE WAS ALWAYS TOO CRUEL AND TOO JEALOUS, BUT I NEVER THOUGHT SHE'D GO SO FAR.
HOW SWEET OF HER TO REVEAL HERSELF SO QUICKLY!

BUT I WONDER... WAS THAT TRULY THE ONLY REASON WHY?
CRUELTY, JEALOUSY...?

Darter Berry
YOU HAVE SAID THAT YOU ADMIRED MY GOOD NATURE... I HOPE IT DOES NOT DISAPPOINT YOU TO FIND I'M NOT THAT SORT OF WOMAN.
DISAPPOINT ME? NOT AT ALL.
REALLY, KNOWING IT WAS A CHOICE YOU MADE...
WELL, I'VE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO MAKE ANY SUCH EFFORT AT ALL. SO I FIND THAT EVEN MORE ADMIRABLE.
BUT IF I CAN'T MAKE THE EFFORT ANY LONGER, WILL *THAT* DISAPPOINT YOU?
HA HA HA HA HA!
SUCH A SILLY THING...!

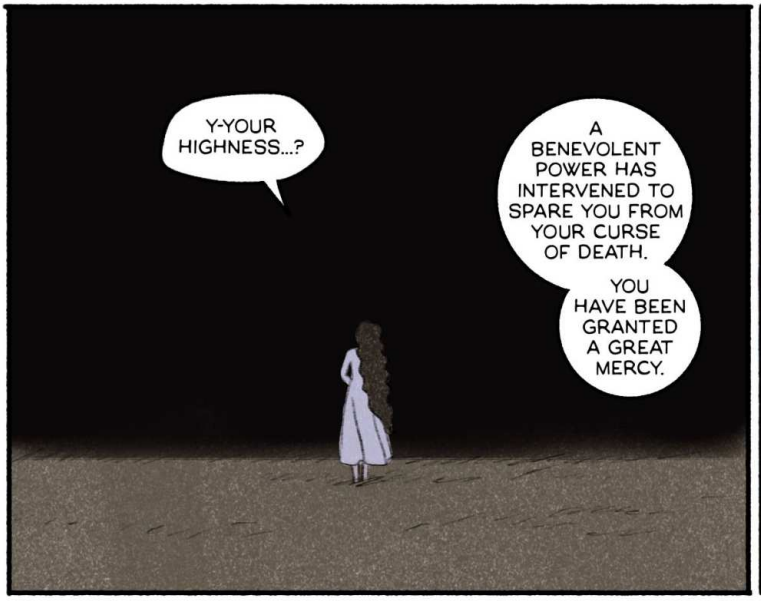

YOU ARE ALONE.
I AM. GENEVIEVE WILL BE HERE SOON.
AH... GOOD.
I HAVE MUCH TO SAY TO YOU ALONE, ANYWAY.

snap!
GENEVIEVE! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!
I'M A BIT BUSY, MATRON MELIORA. COULD WE CATCH UP LATER?
WHAT HAS GOTTEN INTO YOU! HAVE YOU TRULY BEEN LED SO ASTRAY BY BETONY?!
WHAT DO ***YOU*** KNOW? URSA IS A GOOD GIRL.
A GOOD GIRL! I WILL CONCEDE THAT SHE IS NOT THE VILLAIN THAT THE WHOLE ***CASTLE*** SEEMS TO THINK HER NOW. BUT ***GOOD*** IS JUST TOO MUCH!!

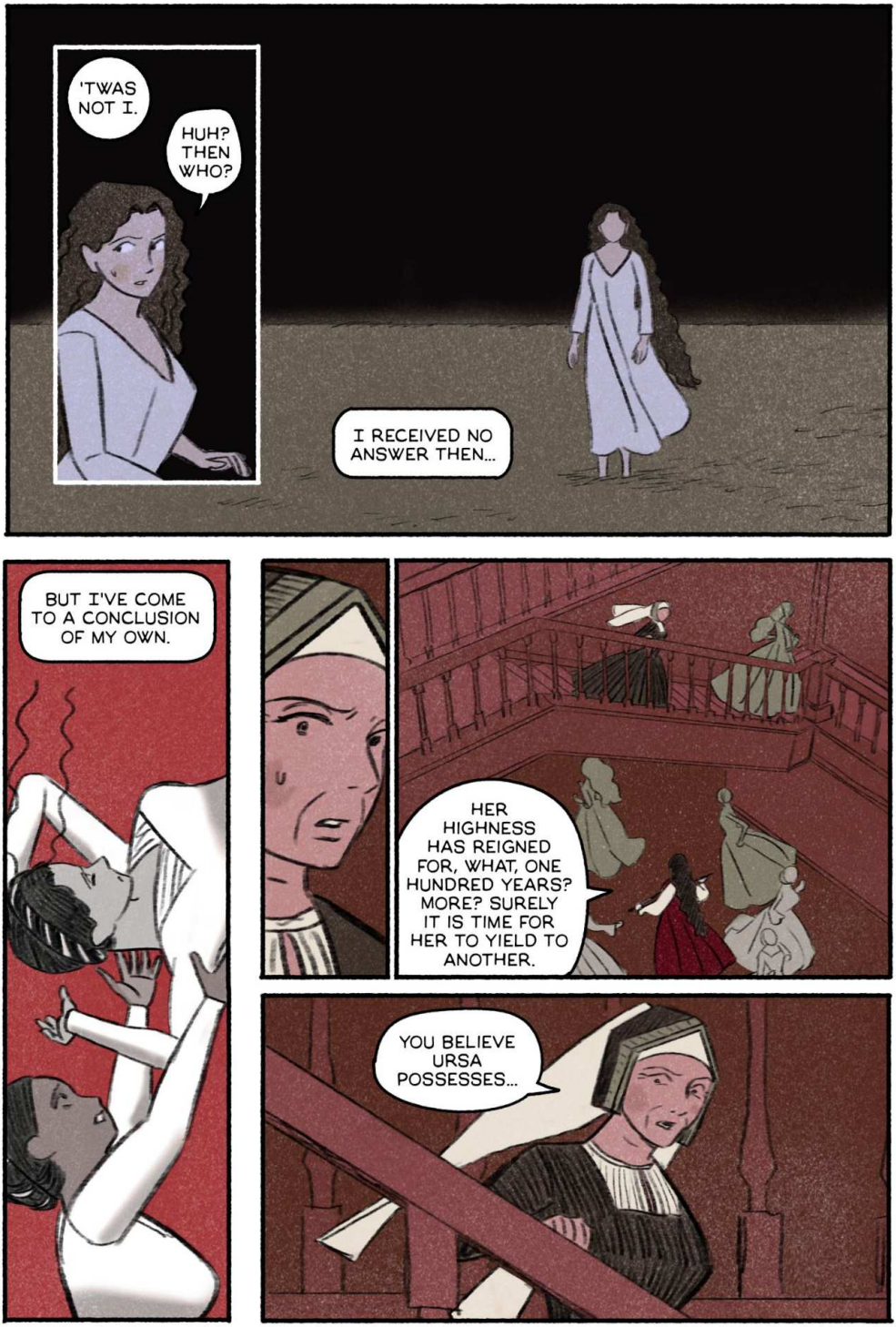

YOU KNOW, MATRON? WHEN I FIRST VISITED THE REALM OF THE DEAD, I HEARD THE VOICE OF THE PRINCESS. AND SHE TOLD ME SOMETHING INTERESTING.

WHEN YOU... WHAT?

LITTLE ONE.


Y-YOUR HIGHNESS...?
A BENEVOLENT POWER HAS INTERVENED TO SPARE YOU FROM YOUR CURSE OF DEATH.
YOU HAVE BEEN GRANTED A GREAT MERCY.

OH. THANK YOU--
NO.


'TWAS NOT I.
HUH? THEN WHO?
I RECEIVED NO ANSWER THEN...
BUT I'VE COME TO A CONCLUSION OF MY OWN.
HER HIGHNESS HAS REIGNED FOR, WHAT, ONE HUNDRED YEARS? MORE? SURELY IT IS TIME FOR HER TO YIELD TO ANOTHER.
YOU BELIEVE URSA POSSESSES...

THE GIFTS OF THE PRINCESS. I KNOW SHE DOES.
IT IS NOT UP TO US MORTALS TO DECLARE SUCH THINGS!
YOU SPEAK OF TREASON, GENEVIEVE. OF INSURRECTION!
I CANNOT TRUST YOU PEOPLE TO NOT BETRAY URSA, EVEN IN HER INNOCENCE.
PERHAPS IF SHE RULED US, SHE'D BE SAFE FROM YOU.
SO GOODBYE, MATRON MELIORA! I MUST MURDER CASTELLANA NOW~!
WHAT?!

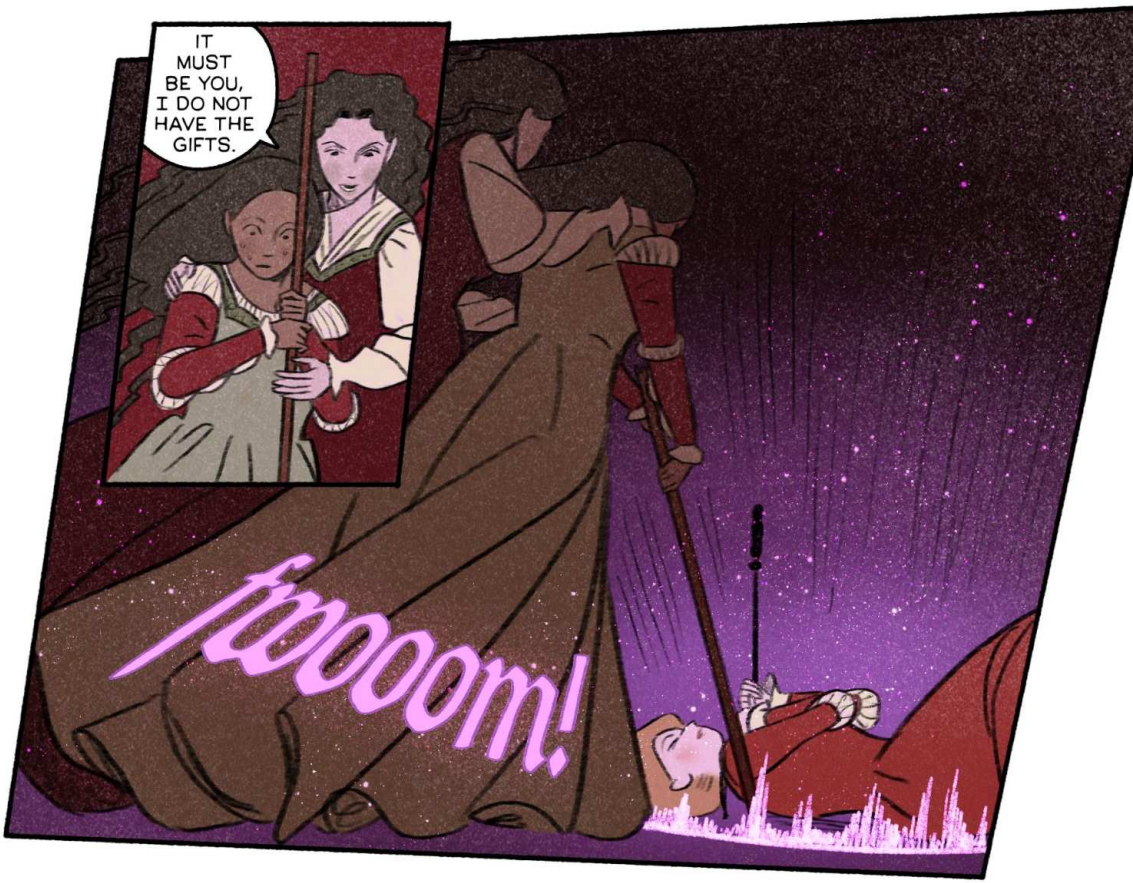
I HAVE BEEN TERRIBLY RUDE TO YOU, URSA.
WELL, OBVIOUSLY. BUT WHY BOTHER WITH AN APOLOGY?
PERHAPS NOW THAT GENEVIEVE IS AWAKE, YOU THOUGHT WE COULD ALL GET ALONG?
IS THAT TOO NAIVE OF ME? I THOUGHT I MIGHT HAVE MISJUDGED YOU.
AFTER ALL, YOU'VE TAKEN GOOD CARE OF SOME-ONE DEAR TO ME...
SOME-ONE DEAR TO YOU?

WHAT A FUNNY THING TO CALL THE GIRL YOU TRIED TO--
DESTROY...

SLAM!
THUNK!!
crash!!
clatter!!
clank
clank

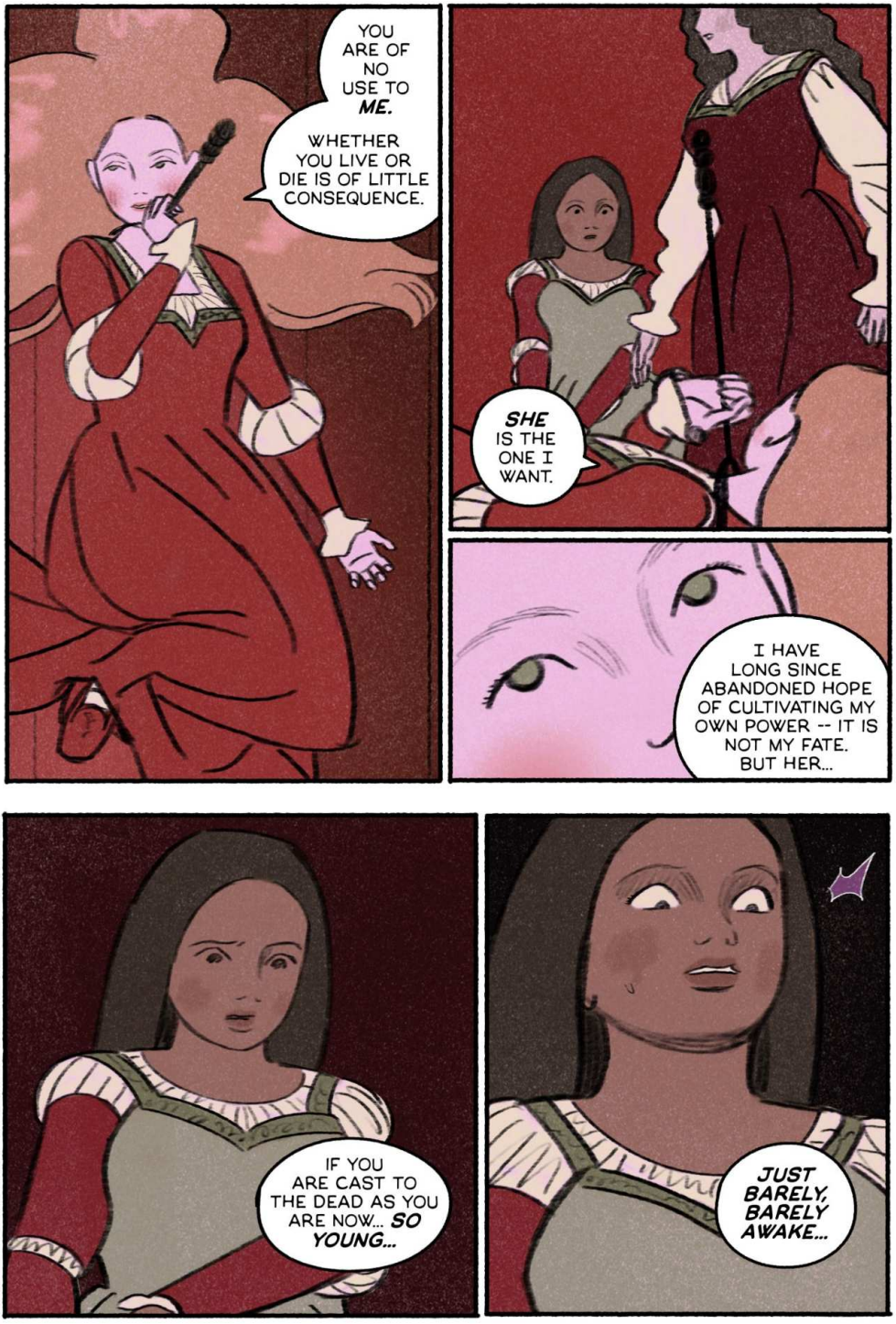
shunk!
sizzle...

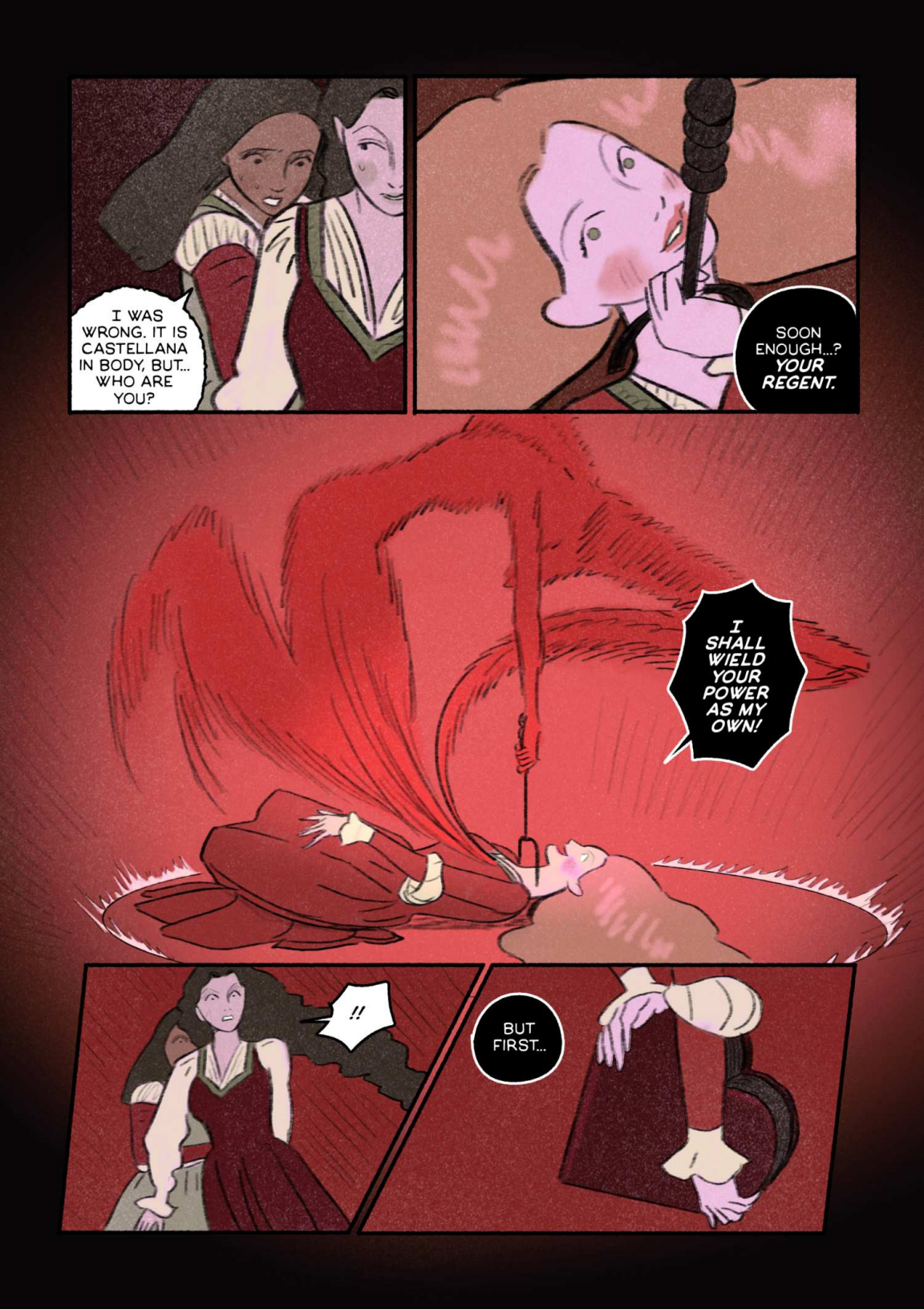
scraaape
thud!!
CLOSE IT!!
ME?!

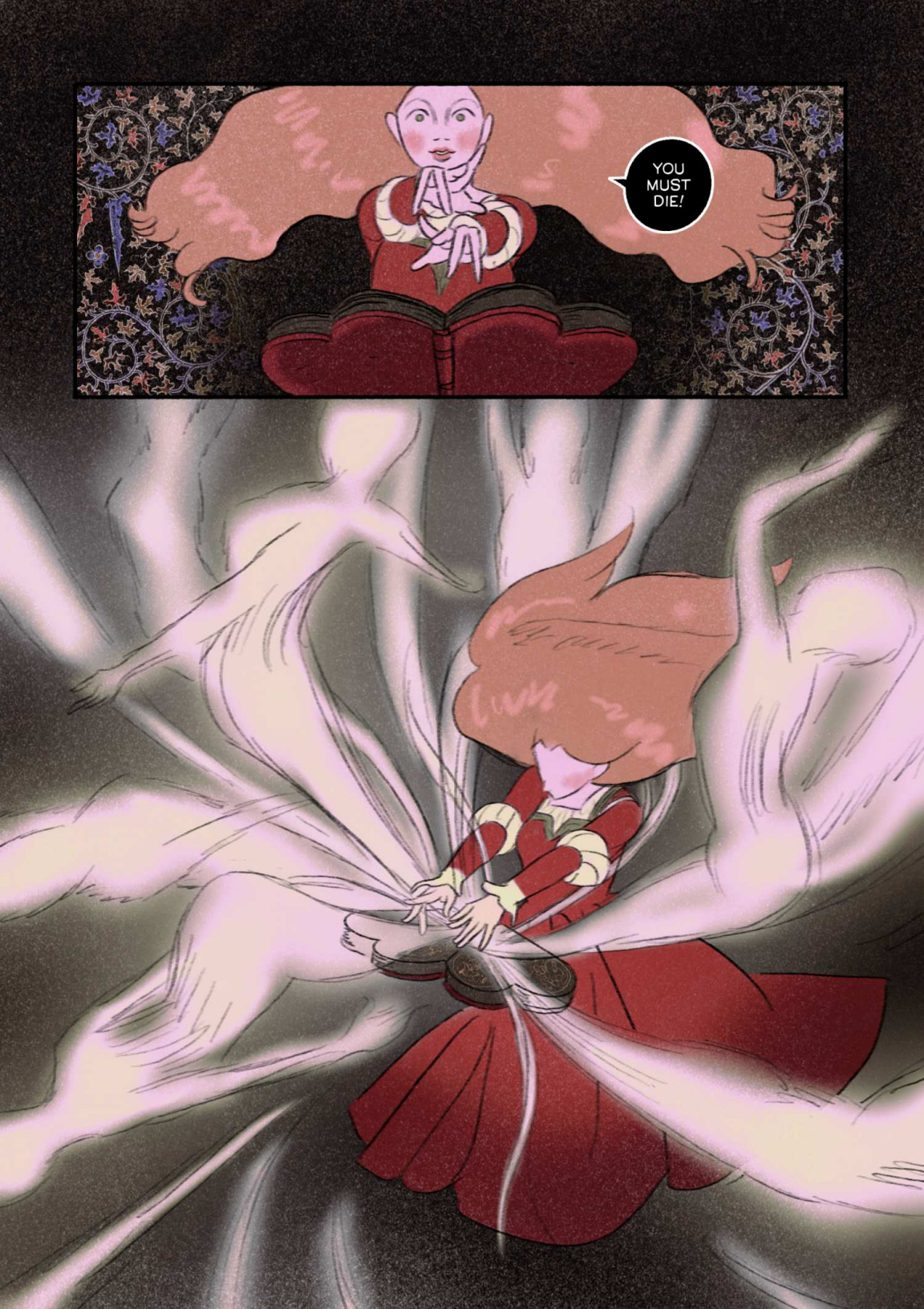

IT MUST BE YOU, I DO NOT HAVE THE GIFTS.
fooooom!

AHA!
THAT SHOULD BE ENOUGH TO RESTRAIN SUCH A TRIVIAL WITCH.

HA...
HA...
WHY?
WHY GO SO FAR TO HURT US?
I DON'T UNDERSTAND... WHY THIS IS HAPPENING.
ANSWER HER QUICKLY, BEFORE I DECIDE WHAT TO DO WITH YOU.
GENEVIEVE! YOU...


YOU ARE OF NO USE TO ME.
WHETHER YOU LIVE OR DIE IS OF LITTLE CONSEQUENCE.
SHE IS THE ONE I WANT.
I HAVE LONG SINCE ABANDONED HOPE OF CULTIVATING MY OWN POWER -- IT IS NOT MY FATE. BUT HER...
IF YOU ARE CAST TO THE DEAD AS YOU ARE NOW... SO YOUNG...
JUST BARELY, BARELY AWAKE...

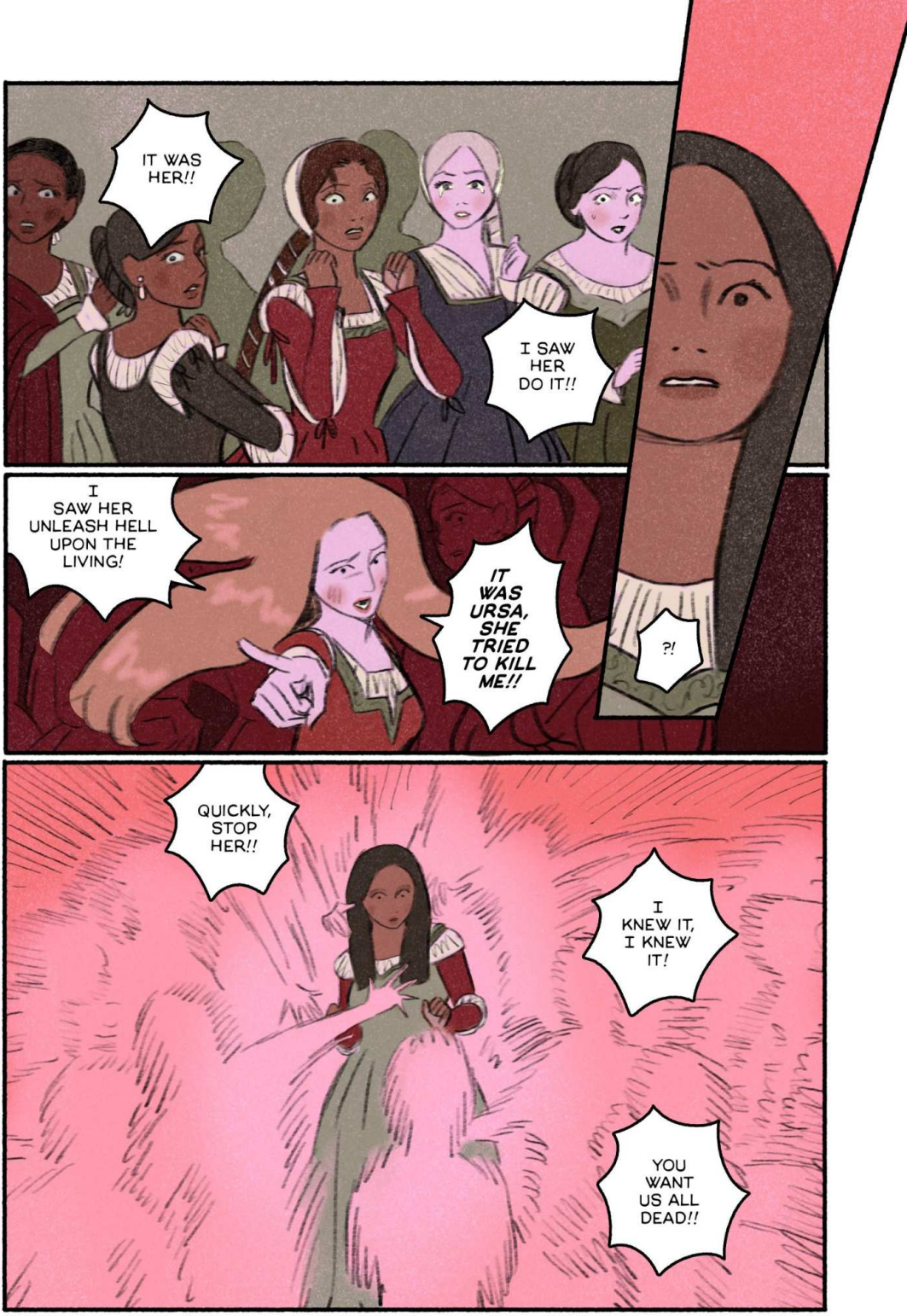

I WAS WRONG. IT IS CASTELLANA IN BODY, BUT... WHO ARE YOU?
SOON ENOUGH...? YOUR REGENT.
I SHALL WIELD YOUR POWER AS MY OWN!
!!
BUT FIRST...


YOU MUST DIE!

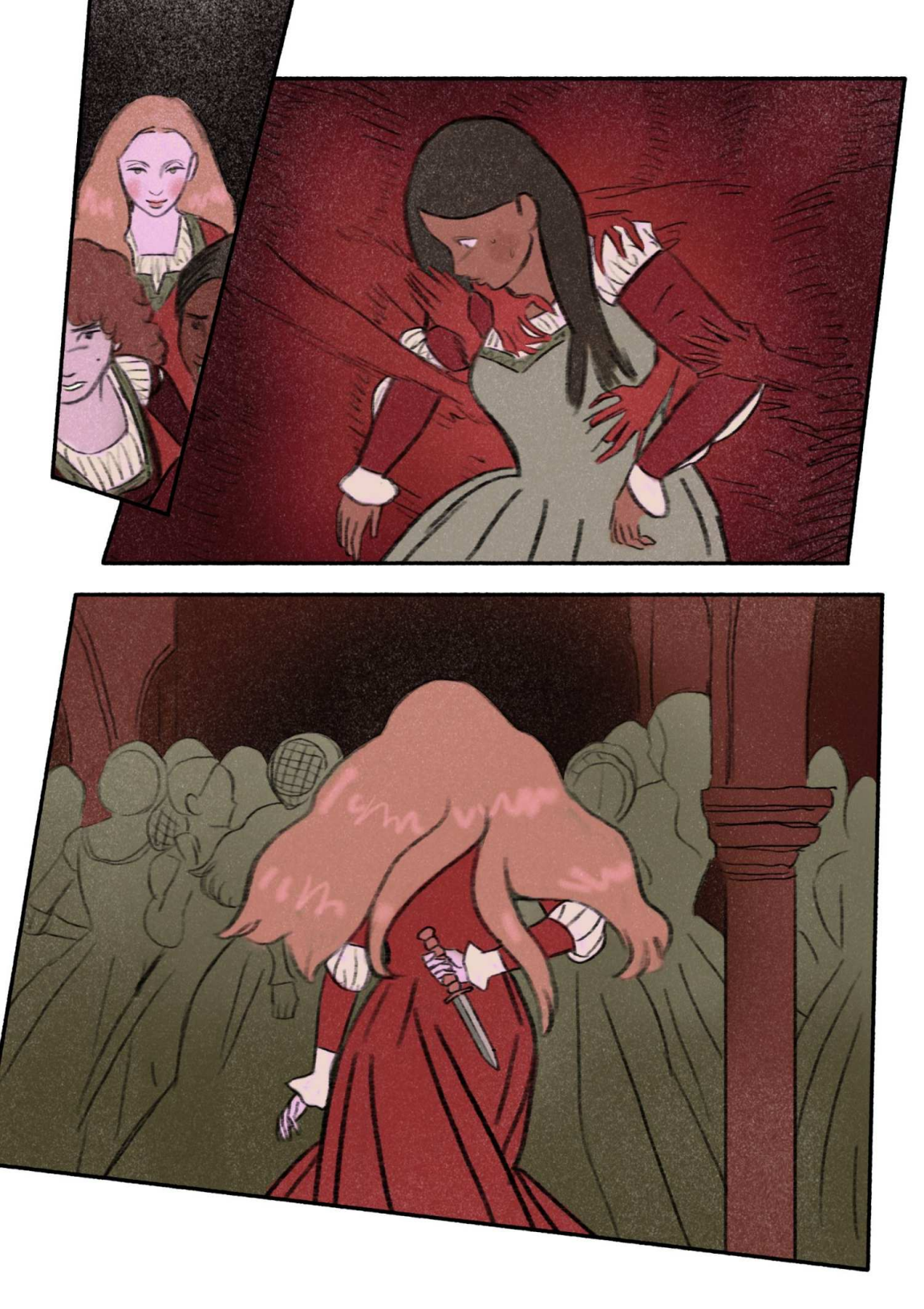
AACK!
NOT AGAIN!!
--!
GENEVIVE!!

ba-thump
ba-thump
ba-thump

Shrieeeeeek!


IT WAS HER!!
I SAW HER DO IT!!
I SAW HER UNLEASH HELL UPON THE LIVING!
IT WAS URSA, SHE TRIED TO KILL ME!!
?!
QUICKLY, STOP HER!!
I KNEW IT, I KNEW IT!
YOU WANT US ALL DEAD!!

THE PRINCESS WON'T ANSWER OUR PRAYERS, IT IS YOUR FAULT!! SHE HAS FORSAKEN US BECAUSE OF YOU!!
MAKE IT STOP!! UNDO IT NOW!!
SOME-ONE MAKE HER TAKE IT BACK!!
MURDERER!!



WHY IS THIS HAPPENING...

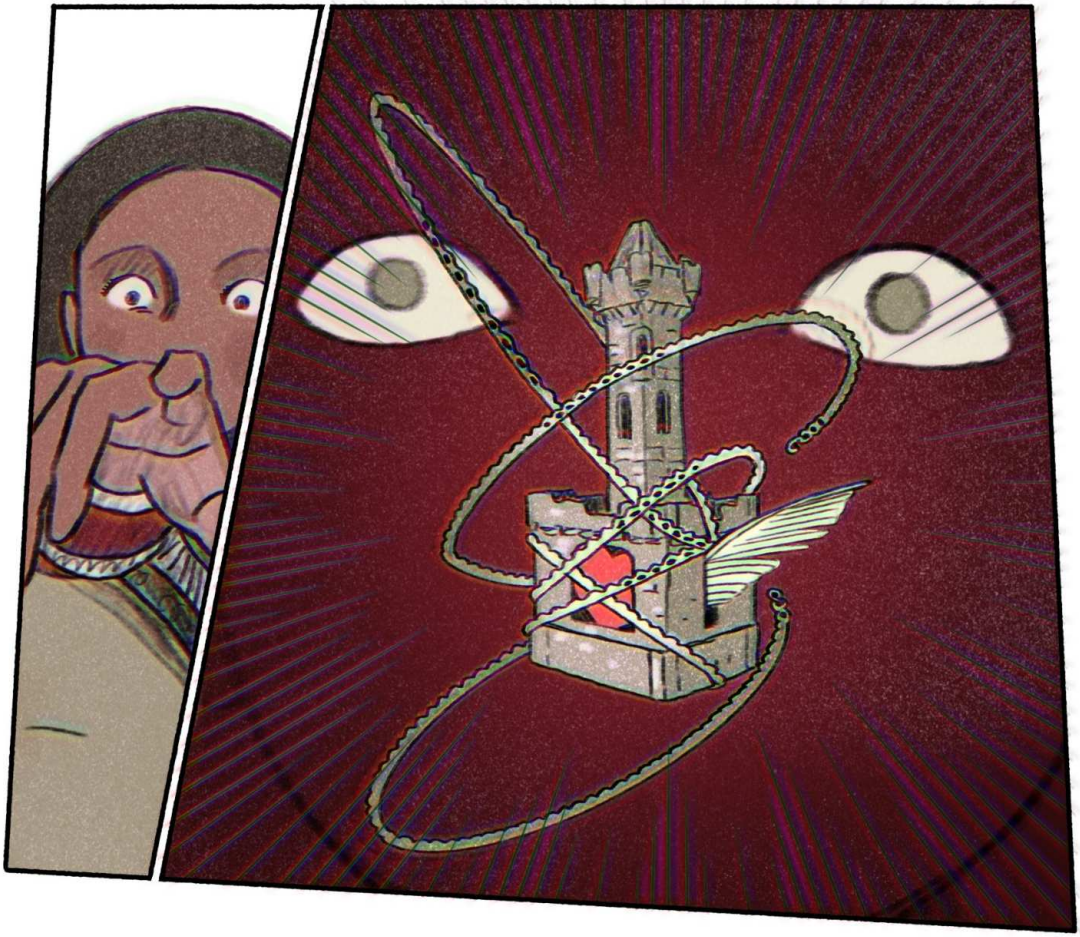
WHY IS THIS HAPPENING...?

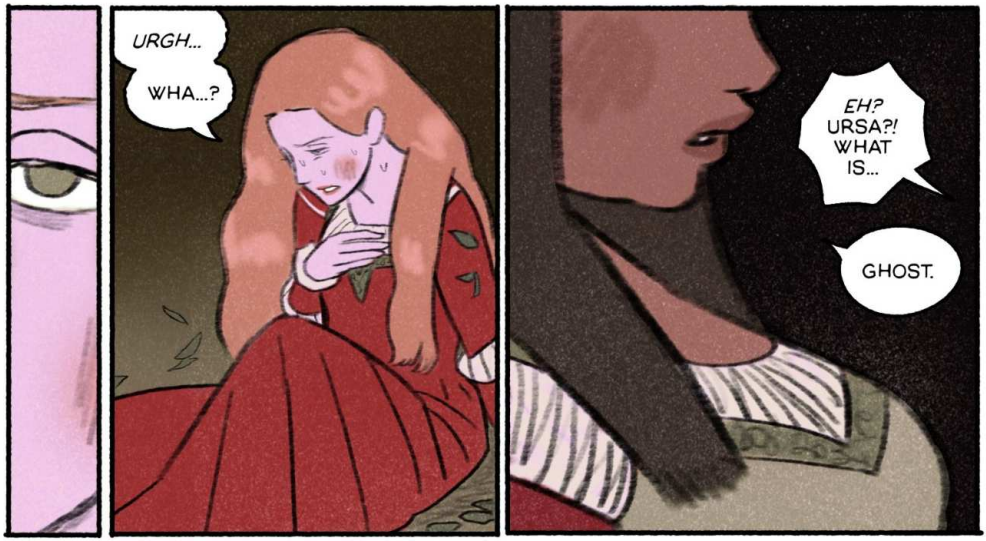
TILLY...
ORELIA...
INGIMAR...
"WHY?"
THAT PHANTOM SHARES HER DESIRE WITH CASTELLANA OF YEW.
WHY... IS SHE DOING THIS?

SHE COVETS YOUR FATE.
YOUR RIGHTFUL THRONE.
MY WHAT?

BANG!

NO...
YOU WAKE?! NOW?

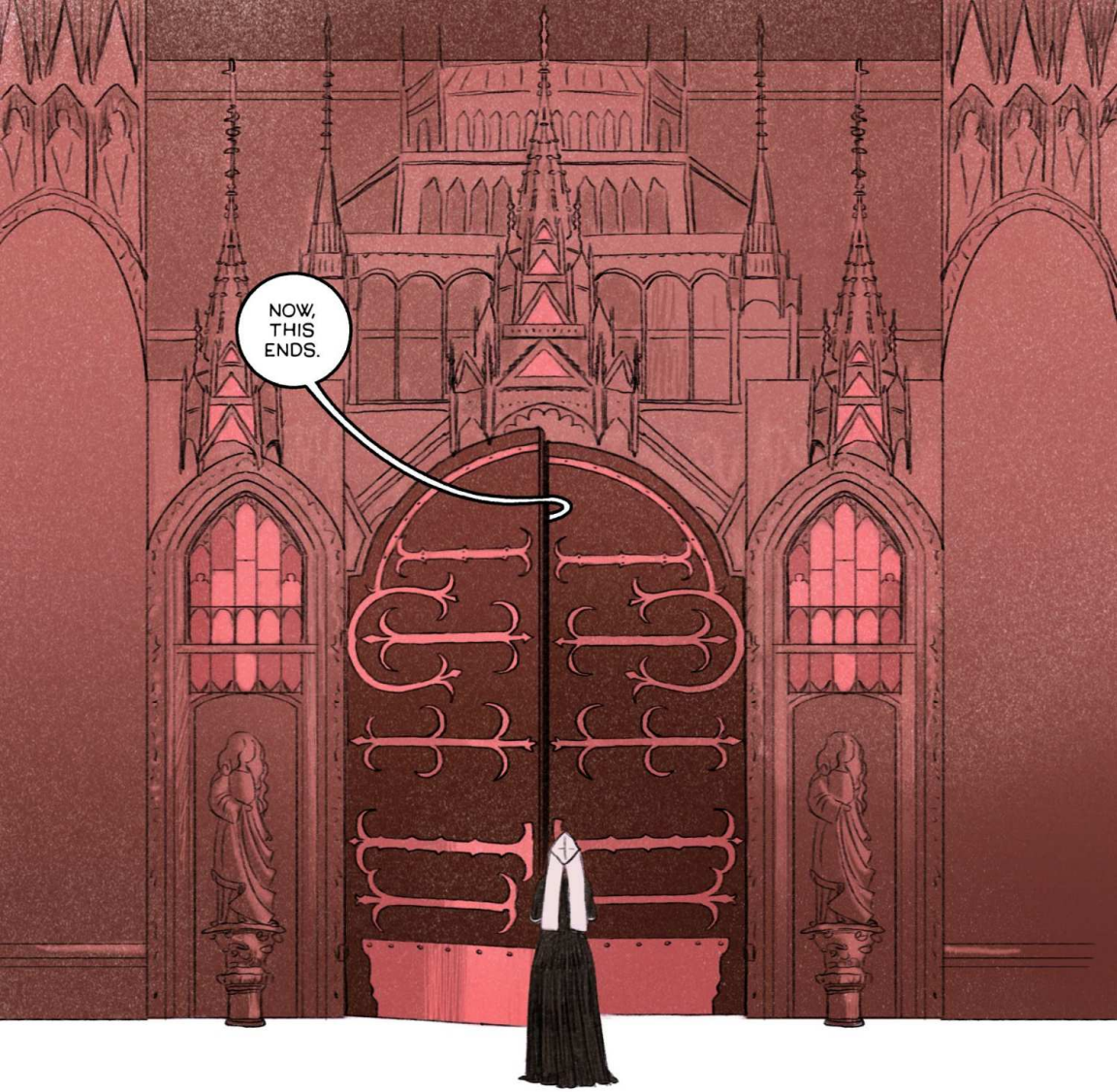



URGH...
WHA...?
EH? URSA?! WHAT IS...
GHOST.

WH--
AND WHO ARE YOU CALLING "GHOST?!"
I HAVE PINNED YOU WITHIN THE SOUL OF THIS LIVING GIRL.
YOU WILL STAY TRAPPED THERE UNTIL HER MORTAL LIFE EXPIRES.
AND THEN YOU SHALL BOTH DISAPPEAR.

fwip

GENEVIVE...
YES... INCREDIBLE!! I KNEW IT!!


NOW, THIS ENDS.

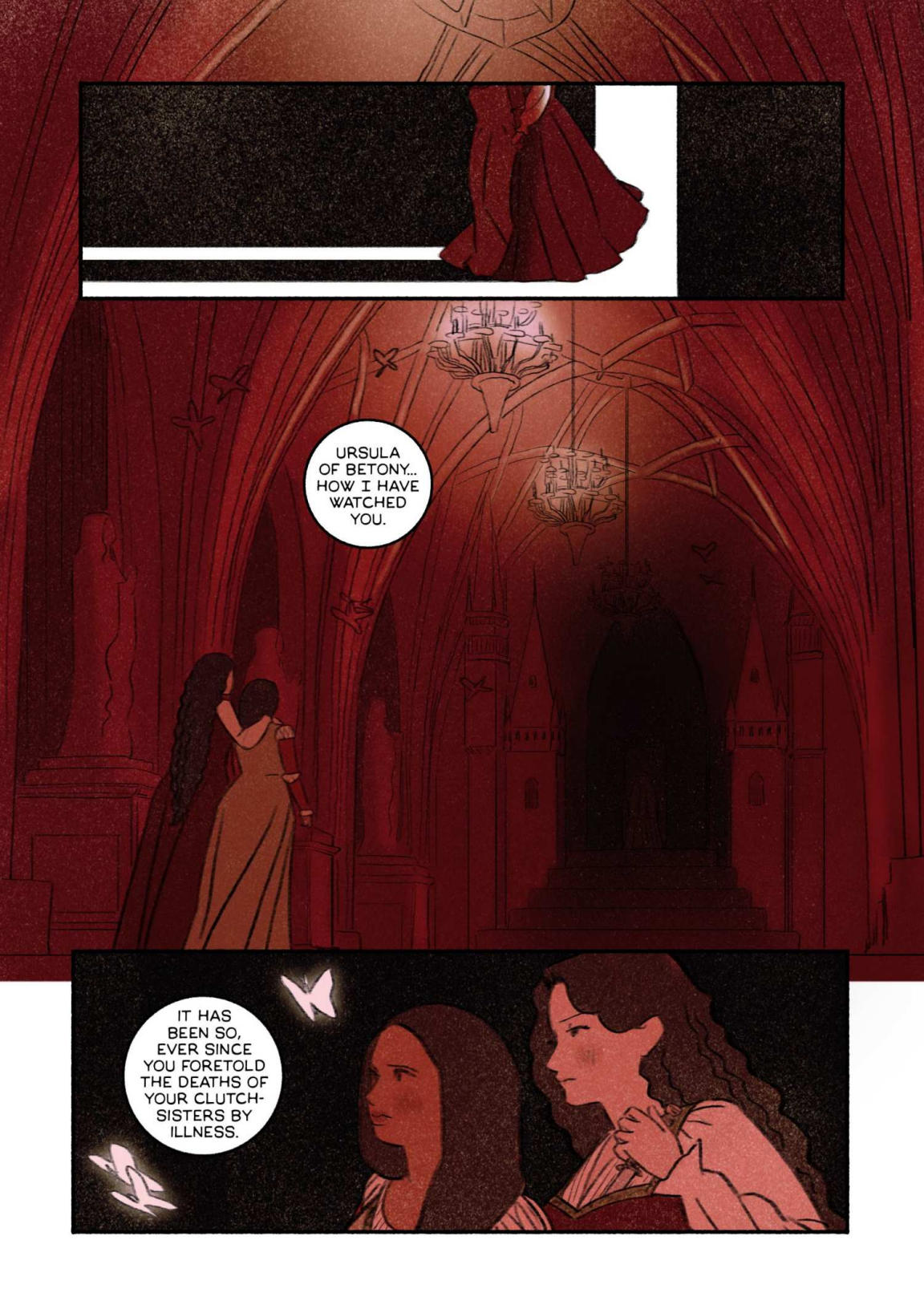
I HAVE SEEN ENOUGH. BRING ME THE GIRL.

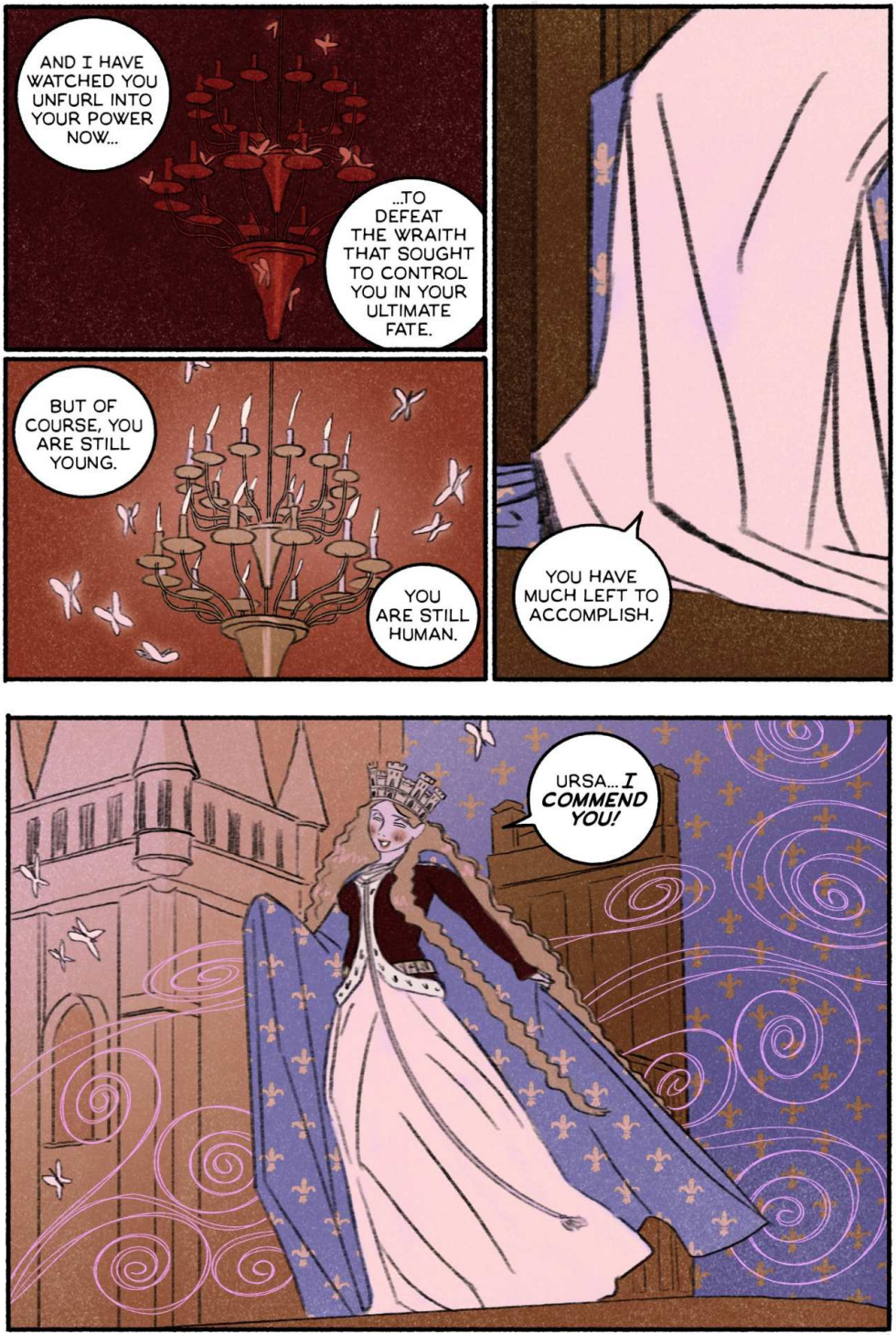
PLEASE, YOUR HIGHNESS... I DO NOT BELIEVE THIS HAVOC TO BE HER DOING.

SHE... IS NOT A BAD PERSON.
WILL SHE BE PUNISHED?
...MUST SHE BE?
MELIORA.
BRING ME THE GIRL.

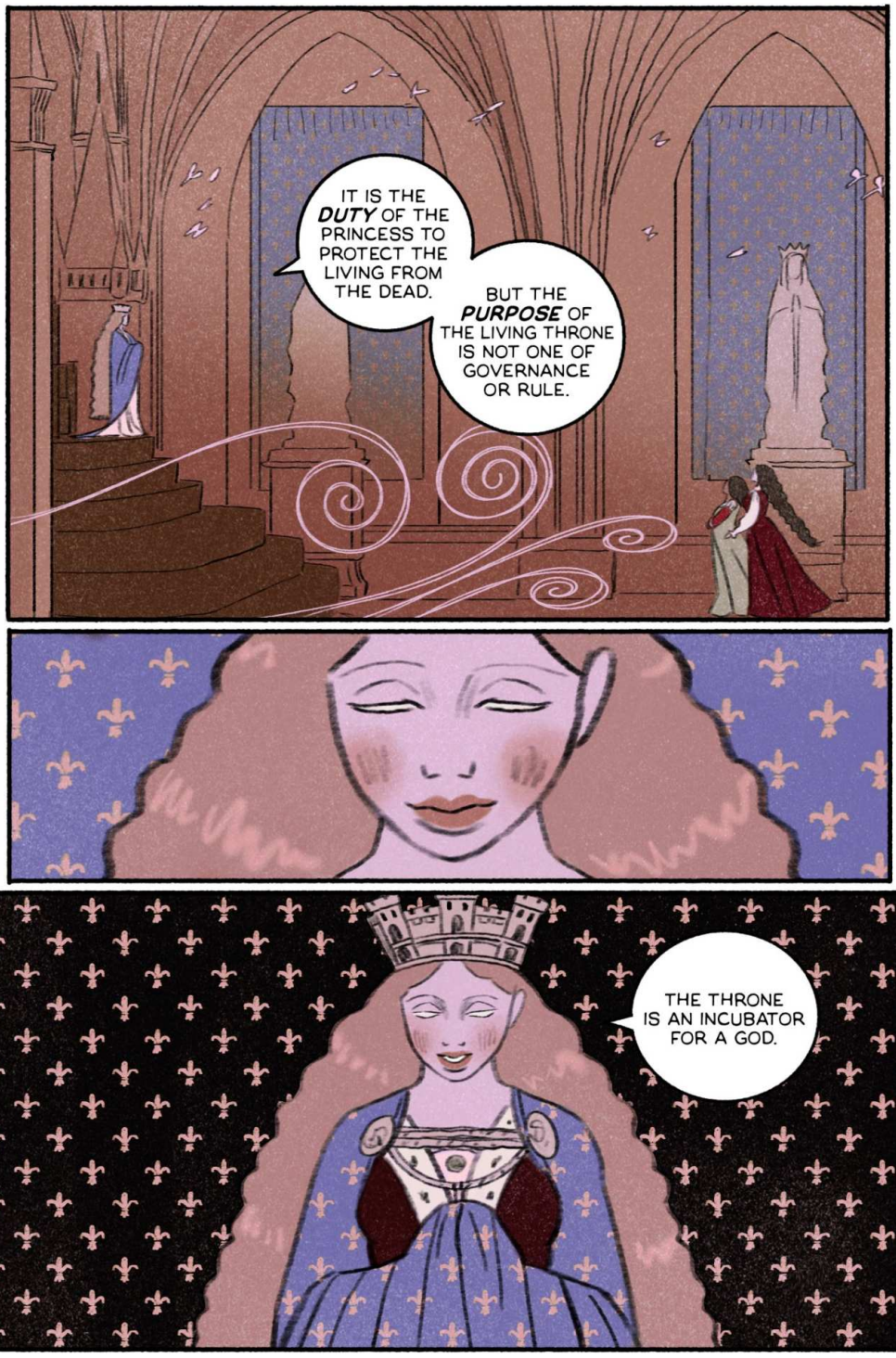
URSULA OF BETONY.
YOU HAVE BEEN SUMMONED BY OUR PRINCESS.

I'VE NOTHING TO ATONE FOR...
IF HER HIGHNESS WISHES TO PUNISH ME, SHE CAN TRY. I WILL NOT MAKE ANY APOLOGY.

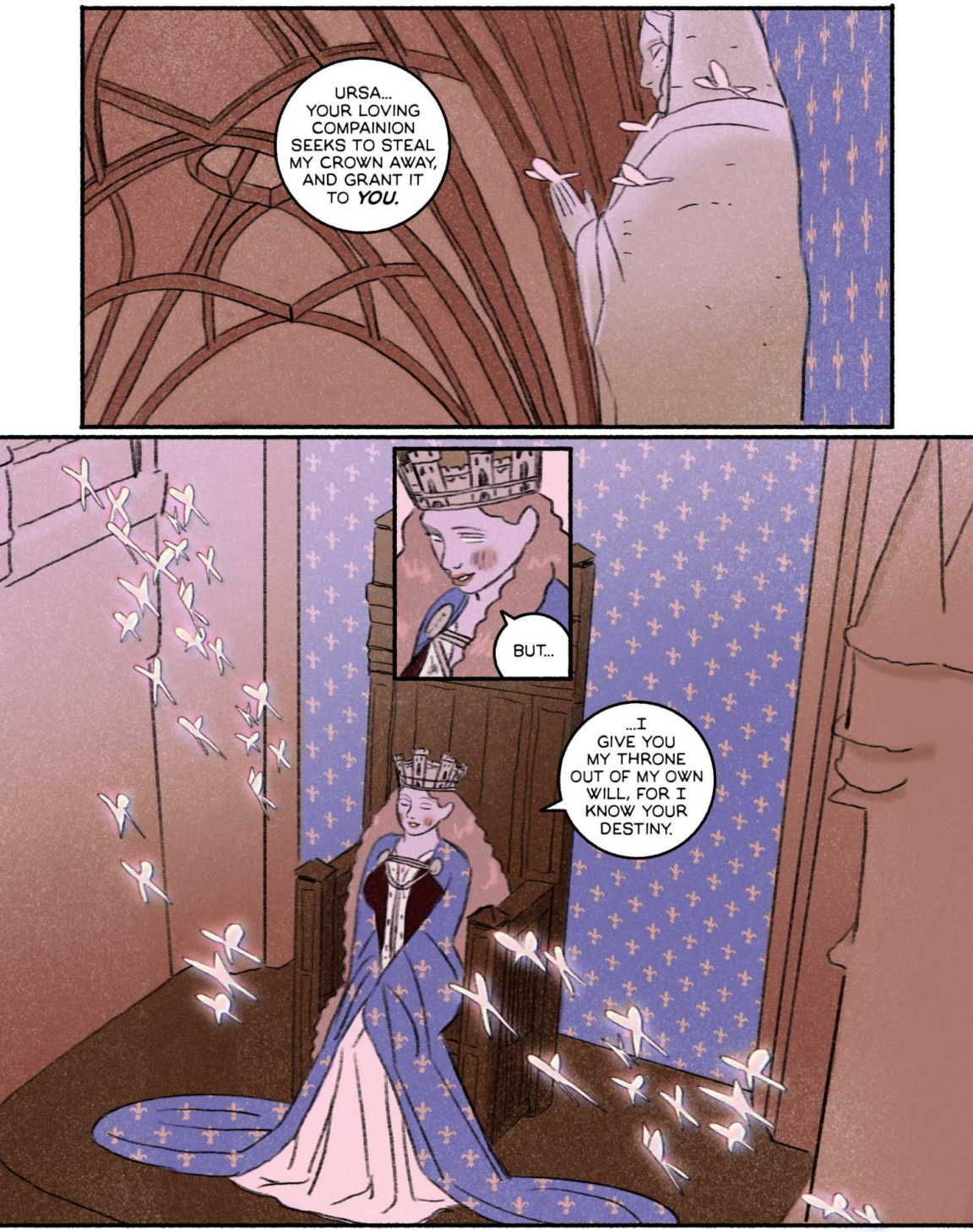

URSULA OF BETONY... HOW I HAVE WATCHED YOU.
IT HAS BEEN SO, EVER SINCE YOU FORETOLD THE DEATHS OF YOUR CLUTCH-SISTERS BY ILLNESS.


AND I HAVE WATCHED YOU UNFURL INTO YOUR POWER NOW...
...TO DEFEAT THE WRAITH THAT SOUGHT TO CONTROL YOU IN YOUR ULTIMATE FATE.
BUT OF COURSE, YOU ARE STILL YOUNG.
YOU ARE STILL HUMAN.
YOU HAVE MUCH LEFT TO ACCOMPLISH.
URSA... I COMMEND YOU!

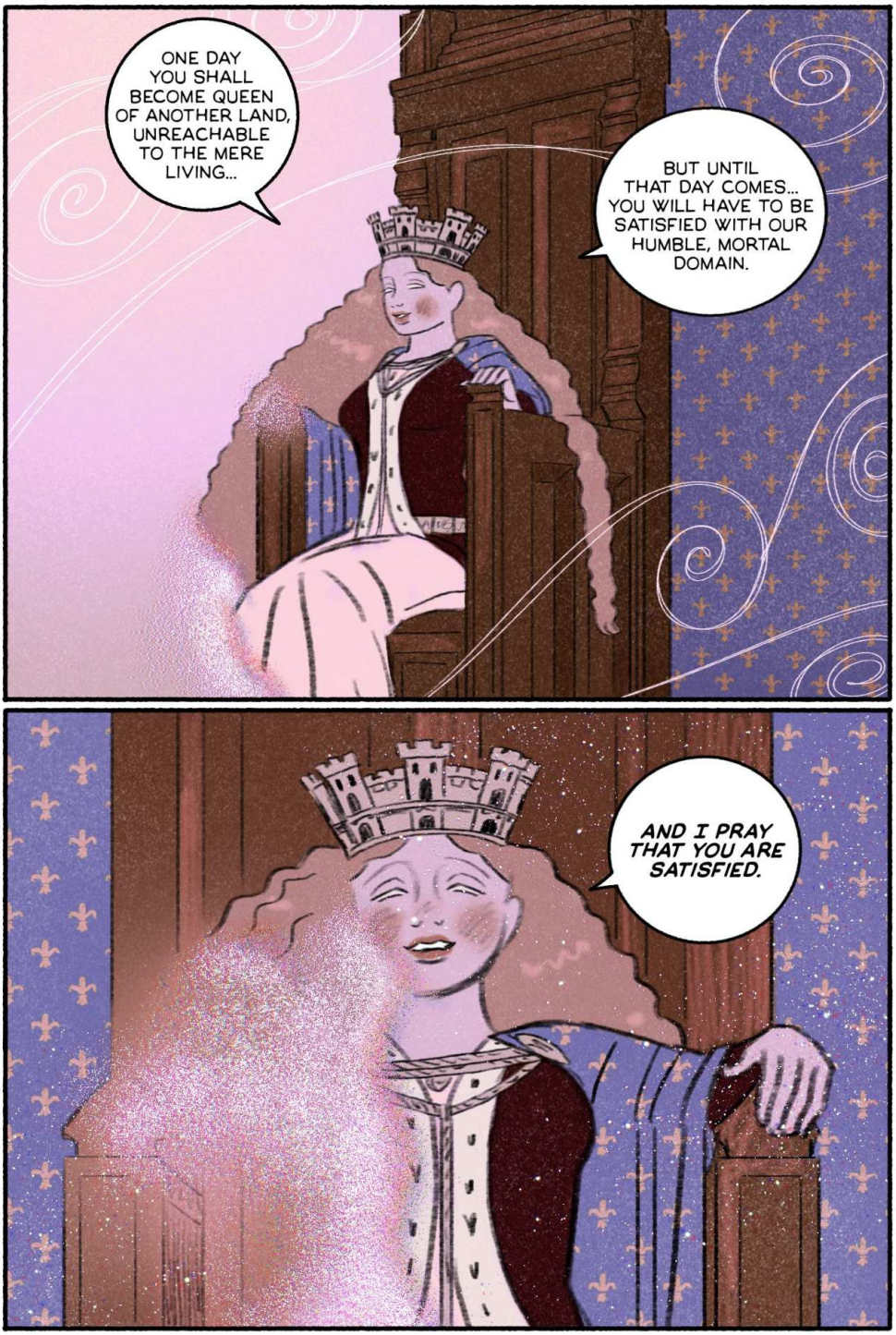
WHAT?
GENEVIEVE OF YEW... IT IS AS YOU LEARNED IN THE WORLD BELOW, AS CASTELLANA LEARNED IN THAT LITTLE BOOK.
THE LADIES OF THE PRINCESS GATHER HERE...
...IN ORDER TO DISCOVER ONE AMONG THEM WITH THE POWER TO SUCCEED THE LIVING THRONE.
THIS IS A SECRET ONLY KNOWN TO THOSE CLOSEST TO THE PRINCESS' HEART -- OR AT LEAST IT IS ***SUPPOSED*** TO BE!
BUT I SHALL CONFER TO YOU AN EVEN MORE PRECIOUS SECRET.


IT IS THE ***DUTY*** OF THE PRINCESS TO PROTECT THE LIVING FROM THE DEAD.
BUT THE ***PURPOSE*** OF THE LIVING THRONE IS NOT ONE OF GOVERNANCE OR RULE.
THE THRONE IS AN INCUBATOR FOR A GOD.

A... GOD...?
URSA...
AS THE LADIES CULTIVATE THEMSELVES TOWARDS THE PRINCESS...
...THE PRINCESS STRIVES TO CULTIVATE HERSELF TOWARDS A SEAT THAT HAS LAID LONG EMPTY.
NONE SO FAR HAVE ACHIEVED IT. CERTAINLY NOT MYSELF.


URSA... YOUR LOVING COMPAINION SEEKS TO STEAL MY CROWN AWAY, AND GRANT IT TO *YOU.*
BUT...
...I GIVE YOU MY THRONE OUT OF MY OWN WILL, FOR I KNOW YOUR DESTINY.

YOU SHALL BE THE LAST OF US, PRINCESS URSULA OF BETONY.


ONE DAY YOU SHALL BECOME QUEEN OF ANOTHER LAND, UNREACHABLE TO THE MERE LIVING...
BUT UNTIL THAT DAY COMES... YOU WILL HAVE TO BE SATISFIED WITH OUR HUMBLE, MORTAL DOMAIN.
AND I PRAY THAT YOU ARE SATISFIED.

TOLL
WHAT-- NO! HER HIGHNESS--
TOLL
HER HIGHNESS HAS... HAS DIED?!
A NEW PRINCESS IS CROWNED?!
HOW?!
TOLL
TOLL
TOLL

TOLL
MY PRINCESS...
...TAKE WHAT'S YOURS.
TOLL

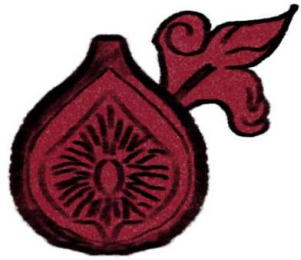
TOLL

TOLL
creeeak

TOLL
TOLL

ꝏLLꝏ.

End



Created for ShortBox Comics Fair, 2025

Many thanks to my family, for their kindness, guidance, and support in all its varied forms! And thank you to Iris, my partner — another book that wouldn't have been made without all you've done for me. I love you!

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